

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

STORIES • INTERVIEWS • BOOK & FILM REVIEWS



**STORIES** JIM HAWKINS • GUY HALEY • HELEN JACKSON  
LAVIE TIDHAR • TRACIE WELSER • GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

**AUTHOR INTERVIEWS** KARIN TIDBECK • SALADIN AHMED

**PLUS** ANSIBLE LINK • MUTANT POPCORN • LASER FODDER • BOOK ZONE • THE READERS' POLL OPENS



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## All is Flux, Nothing Stays Still

One of the pleasures of working on *Interzone* is the way some issues develop a personality that comes as a surprise even to those of us who have read all the stories in advance. And we have to admit the occasional twinge of pride when we consider the variety of themes, subgenres, settings, tropes, techniques, symbols, storytelling styles and voices we've been able to include over the past fifty issues.

For example, *Interzone* #242 included 'Strigoi', Lavie Tidhar's tale of interracial alienation in the spaceways, and 'Needlepoint', Priya Sharma's subtle but edgy story set in an alternative Albion. Both tales are admirably idiosyncratic: one has clearly identifiable science fictional elements, while the other skitters along in the debatable lands between fantasy and history.

But that's enough about the pleasures of working on *Interzone* in its 30th year. What about the frustrations and failures? A major source of disappointment is however eclectic the taste of the editors and however determined we are to be flexible, it's inevitable we are going to reject some elegantly structured, linguistically complex and strikingly imaginative stories simply because they have no valid and defensible fit with the genres of sf, fantasy, horror or crime. In other words, all too often the team at TTA Towers experience the pain of rejecting engaging and powerful stories because we can't find a home for them in *Interzone*, *Black Static* or *Crimewave*. And the pain is heightened by our awareness that this kind of work is increasingly unlikely to find a place in a publication that will do it justice.

Three exciting submissions we've found it impossible to place in a TTA publication – stories by Tim Lees, Nina Allan and Tyler Keevil – have inspired us to create **FLUX**, an occasional supplement containing such stories, that we'll send out free to subscribers of *Interzone* and *Black Static*.

As Heraclitus of Ephesus said: "All is flux, nothing stays still". TTA Press is heading for a state of Flux – and we're hoping you'll feel a damn good Flux is just what you need.

## Readers' Poll

It's time to start voting for your favourite *Interzone* stories of 2012. We welcome back Martin McGrath to oversee the poll, and there are three ways you can send him your votes: by post, email, or via a form on the website. Vote for or against as many stories as you like. There are more details and a list of eligible stories on page 33.

We've decided to restrict the poll to fiction only this year, and not include artwork. Like the magazine's nonfiction, the art is done by the same small team and it no longer seems right that they should compete with each other, especially as the work is commissioned rather than unsolicited. Let us know if you think that's a mistake.



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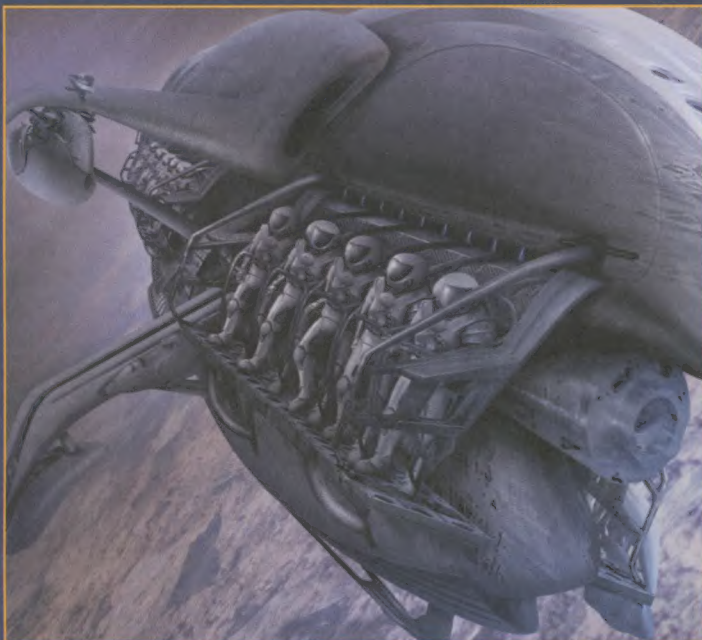
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## Submissions

Unsolicited submissions of short stories are always welcome, but please follow the contributors' guidelines on the website.



## FICTION



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prints are available: contact the artist via his website at  
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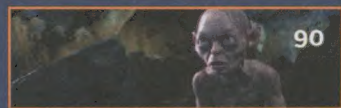
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# DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

**As Others See Us.** Robert McCrum once again indulged in genre-bashing, with exceptions: 'Science fiction is the cockroach in the house of books: it survives on scraps and never goes away. Occasionally, as in the work of HG Wells and JG Ballard, it becomes sublime.' (*Guardian*)

**Awards.** James Tait Black Award all-time "best of best" fiction winner since the award began in 1919: Angela Carter (1940–1992), *Nights at the Circus*. • New York Film Critics Circle: best animated feature, *Frankenweenie*. • Roald Dahl Funny Prize, funniest book for 7–14 year olds category: Jamie Thomson, *Dark Lord: The Teenage Years*. • 2012 SFWA Grand Master for life achievement: Gene Wolfe. ('If you keep this up I'll start thinking I'm a good writer.') • US National Book Awards: the Young People's Literature winner was a fantasy, William Alexander's *Goblin Secrets*. • World Fantasy Award novel winner: Lavie Tidhar, *Osama*.

**C.S. Lewis** will be honoured with a memorial stone in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, on 22 November 2013 – the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

**We Are Everywhere.** Jon Stewart on the copious intimate emails between a US general and a married woman: '30,000 pages of emails – I could understand it if Stephen King and George R.R. Martin were having an affair!' (*The Daily Show*)

**Camille Paglia's** enthusiasm for sf sublimities earned her a *Private Eye* 'Pseuds Corner' appearance: '...it is emotionally overwhelming, with the intensity and sweep of a Puccini opera. The long finale of

*Revenge of the Sith*, leading up to Darth Vader's tortured fabrication and the birth and separation of the twin babies Luke and Leia, is in my view the most powerful work of art in any genre in the past 30 years – including literature.' (*Huffington Post*)

**Terry Pratchett** 'nearly died' in a New York cab during his November US publicity tour. When his heart went into fibrillation, his assistant Rob Wilkins 'had to kneel on the back seat of the taxi and give him CPR. It was fingers down throat stuff.' After a rapid recovery, Terry remarked that he'd heard book-signing tours could kill you 'quicker than drugs, booze and fast women'. (*Telegraph*) He also announced that he'll pass the Discworld novel franchise to Rhianna Pratchett when no longer able to write: 'The Discworld is safe in my daughter's hands.' (Interview, *New Statesman*)

**As Others See Us II.** A little love in the *Firefly* reunion TV special: 'And for the fans – the greatest moment is this brief snippet where Gina Torres says, "There's nothing like a scifi fan. Like warm honey, poured all over you." I want to watch that clip over and over.' (i99) Depends which fan gets poured.

**Malcolm Edwards**, a founding *Interzone* editor, is in *The Bookseller's* list of '100 most influential people in the book industry'. They call him 'The brainy fixer behind the scenes at Orion since 1998.'

**Publishers & Sinners.** Fictionwise.com, the early e-publishing venture that was pretty good until bought up by Barnes & Noble, closed in December. After so many years I'll miss all those Fictionwise royalty payments of exciting sums

like \$1.84. • *Analog* and *Asimov's SF* increased their short-fiction payment rates from 6–8 cents per word to 7–9 cents per word.

**Paul Krugman**, introducing a Folio Society edition of the Foundation trilogy, has a Margaret Atwood Moment: 'Maybe the first thing to say about "Foundation" is that it's not exactly science fiction – not really. Yes, it's set in the future, there's interstellar travel, people shoot each other with blasters instead of pistols and so on. But these are superficial details, playing a fairly minor part in the story.'

**Algis Budrys** has a new nonfiction book out: a little project in which I took part. See <http://ae.ansible.co.uk>.

**Thog's Masterclass.** Sharing Dept. 'Leaks were something Emma didn't want to share.' (Elizabeth Lowell, *Death Echo*, 2010) • Dept of Girly Superlatives. "Good girl," said Dex, patting her satiny bare shoulder as he stood free again. "You're a sport and a gentleman. You don't understand the terms? They're earth words, Greca, that carry the highest praise a man can give a woman." (Paul Ernst, 'The Red Hell of Jupiter', *Astounding*, October 1931) • Spung in a Cold Climate Dept. 'His nipples were standing so erect they looked like little pink pencil erasers.' 'I looked down and noticed my own chest made it look like I was trying to smuggle candy corn out of the country, two at a time.' (Nancy A. Collins, *Right Hand Magic*, 2010) • Dept of Pet Names. 'When he got there, his Deputy, a portly bald man with a ginger moustache called Bo Sampson, was trying to calm down a hysterical man.' (Adam Millard, *Dead West*, 2011)





## R.I.P.

**Janet Berliner-Gluckman**

(1939–2012), South African-born horror/dark fantasy author and anthologist who won a Stoker award for 'Children of the Dusk' (1997) with George Guthridge, died on 24 October; she was 73.

**John Coates**

(1927–2012), UK film-maker and TV executive best known for *Yellow Submarine* (1968) and *The Snowman* (1982, based on Raymond Briggs' book), died on 16 September aged 84.

**Charles E. Fritch**

(1927–2012) US author and editor whose stories are collected in *Crazy Mixed-Up Planet* (1969) and *Horses' Asteroid* (1970) died on 11 October; he was 85. One story, 'The Misfortune Cookie', was adapted for *The Twilight Zone*.

**Jacques Goimard**

(1934–2012), French critic, editor, novelist and anthologist, died on 25 October aged 78. As acquiring editor at the Paris-based Pocket paperback imprint, he published some 800 works of sf/fantasy.

**David Grove**

(1940–2012), US illustrator inducted into the Illustration Hall of Fame in 2007, died on 25 October aged 72. Genre work included the striking *Something Wicked This Way Comes* film poster, the *Eye of the World* ebook, and covers and interiors for Gene Wolfe titles.

**Larry Hagman**

(1931–2012), US actor best remembered as J.R. in *Dallas* and the harried Captain/Major Anthony Nelson in the fantasy sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970), died on 23 November; he was 81.

**Alan Hunter** (1923–2012), UK artist whose work included covers for *Nebula SF* in 1952–1953 and much interior art for *Nebula* and *New Worlds* through the 1950s, died on 31 August aged 89. He was unfailingly generous with artwork for semiprozines and fanzines including *Algol/Starship*, *Ansible*, *Banana Wings*, *Ghosts and Scholars*, *SF Chronicle*, *SFinx*, *Vector*, *Whispers* and many more.

**Julie Ann Jardine**

(1926–2012), sf author and fan who with her then husband Jack Jardine wrote *The Sword of Lankor* (1966) and *The Mind Monsters* (1966) as by Howard L. Cory, died in November; she was 86.

**Kenneth Kendall**

(1924–2012), BBC radio announcer and newsreader (the first to appear on BBC television) who featured as a newsreader in *Doctor Who*: 'The War Machines' (1966) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), died in November aged 88.

**Paul Kurtz**

(1925–2012), humanist/sceptical author and founder of Prometheus Books in 1969, died on 20 October aged 86. Prometheus published many genre works (including Martin Gardner's *No-Sided Professor*) before launching its dedicated sf/fantasy imprint Pyr in 2005.

**Patrick Moore**

(1923–2012), UK astronomer, author and TV personality who had presented the BBC's *The Sky at Night* since April 1957, died on 9 December; he was 89. His over 20 novels for young readers were all sf; nonfiction works of genre interest include his sf survey *Science and Fiction* (1957), the spoof *How Britain*

*Won the Space Race* (1972 with Desmond Leslie), and the round-up of oddball science *Can You Speak Venusian?* (1972). He made a cameo appearance as himself in the *Doctor Who* episode 'The Eleventh Hour' (2010).

**Patrick O'Connor**, former editor-in-chief or senior editor for several US publishers including Pinnacle and Popular Library, died on 13 October aged 87. His authors included Ayn Rand and Andrew M. Greeley.

**Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.**

(1950–2012), US author of several entertaining sf novels including *Mayflies* (1979), *ORA:CLE* (1984) and the *Journeys of McGill Feighan* tetralogy, died on 7 November; he was 61.

**Spain Rodriguez** (Manuel Rodriguez, 1940–2012), US underground cartoonist who created the post-holocaust superhero Trashman, died on 28 November; he was 72.

**John D. Squires**

(1948–2012), US book dealer, *New York Review of SF* contributor and world authority on M.P. Shiel, died on 2 November; he was 64.

**Boris Strugatski**

(1933–2012), Russian author whose collaborations with his brother Arkady (1925–1991) were among their country's finest and most-translated genre sf, died on 19 November. Their best-known single work may be the story translated as *Roadside Picnic* (1972) and adapted as Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Both were popular guests of honour at the 1987 UK Worldcon in Brighton.



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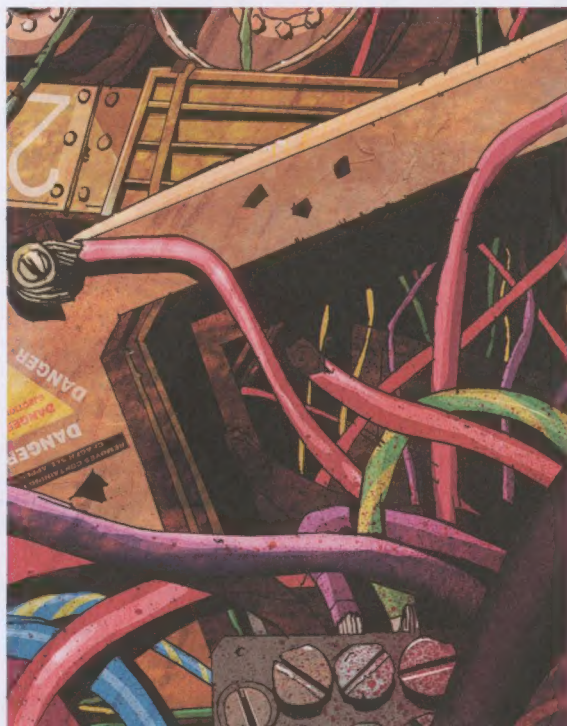
# THE BOOK SELLER

Achimwene loved Central Station. He loved the adaptoplant neighbourhoods sprouting over the old stone and concrete buildings, the budding of new apartments and the gradual fading and shearing of old ones, dried windows and walls flaking and falling down in the wind.

Achimwene loved the calls of the alte-zachen, the rag-and-bone men, in their traditional passage across the narrow streets, collecting junk to carry to their immense junkyard-cum-temple on the hill in Jaffa to the south. He loved the smell of sheesha pipes on the morning wind, and the smell of bitter coffee, loved the smell of fresh horse manure left behind by the alte-zachen's patient, plodding horses.

Nothing pleased Achimwene Haile Selassie Jones as much as the sight of the sun rising behind Central Station, the light slowly diffusing beyond and over the immense, hour-glass shape of the space port. Or almost nothing. For he had one overriding passion, at the time that we pick up this thread, a passion which to him was both a job and a mission.

## LAVIE TIDHAR





Early morning light suffused Central Station and the old cobbled streets. It highlighted exhausted prostitutes and street-sweeping machines, the bobbing floating lanterns that, with dawn coming, were slowly drifting away, to be stored until nightfall. On the rooftops solar panels unfurled themselves, welcoming the sun. The air was still cool at this time. Soon it would be hot, the sun beating down, the aircon units turning on with a roar of cold air in shops and restaurants and crowded apartments all over the old neighbourhood.

"Ibrahim," Achimwene said, acknowledging the *alte-zachen* man as he approached. Ibrahim was perched on top of his cart, the boy Ismail by his side. The cart was pulled by a solitary horse, an old grey being who blinked at Achimwene patiently. The cart was already filled, with adap-to-plant furniture, scrap plastic and metal, boxes of discarded house wares and, lying carelessly on its side, a discarded stone bust of Albert Einstein.

"Achimwene," Ibrahim said, smiling. "How is the weather?"

"Fair to middling," Achimwene said, and they both laughed, comfortable in the near-daily ritual.

This is Achimwene: he was not the most imposing of people, did not draw the eye in a crowd. He was slight of frame, and somewhat stooped, and wore old-fashioned glasses to correct a minor fault of vision. His hair was once thickly curled but not much of it was left now, and he was mostly, sad to say, bald. He had a soft mouth and patient, trusting eyes, with fine lines of disappointment at their corners. His name meant 'brother' in Chichewa, a language dominant in Malawi, though he was of the Joneses of Central Station, and the brother of Miriam Jones, of Mama Jones' Shebeen on Neve Sha'anani Street. Every morning he rose early, bathed hurriedly, and went out into the streets in time to catch the rising sun and the *alte-zachen* man. Now he rubbed his hands together, as if cold, and said, in his soft, quiet voice, "Do you have anything for me today, Ibrahim?"

Ibrahim ran his hand over his own bald pate and smiled. Sometimes the answer was a simple "No." Sometimes it came with a hesitant "Perhaps..."

Today it was a "Yes," and Achimwene raised his eyes, to him or to the heavens, and said, "Show me?"

"Ismail," Ibrahim said, and the boy, who sat beside him wordless until then, climbed down from the cart with a quick, confident grin and went to the back of the cart. "It's heavy!" he complained. Achimwene hurried to his side and helped him bring down a heavy box.

He looked at it.

"Open it," Ibrahim said. "Are these any good to you?"

Achimwene knelt by the side of the box. His fingers reached for it, traced an opening. Slowly, he pulled the flaps of the box apart. Savouring the moment that light would fall down on the box's contents, and the smell of those precious, fragile things inside would rise, released, into the air, and tickle his nose. There was no other smell like it in the world, the smell of old and weathered paper.

The box opened. He looked inside.

Books. Not the endless scrolls of text and images, moving and static, nor full-immersion narratives he understood other people to experience, in what he called, in his obsolete tongue, the networks, and others called, simply, the Conversation. Not those, to which he, anyway, had no access. Nor were they books as decorations, physical objects hand-crafted by artisans, vellum-bound, gold-tooled, typeset by hand and sold at a premium.

No.

He looked at the things in the box, these fragile, worn, faded, thin, cheap paper-bound books. They smelled of dust, and mould, and age. They smelled, faintly, of pee, and tobacco, and spilled coffee. They smelled like things which had *lived*.

They smelled like history.

With careful fingers he took a book out and held it, gently turning the pages. It was all but priceless. His breath, as they often said in those very same books, caught in his throat.

It was a *Ringo*.

A genuine Ringo.

The cover of this fragile paperback showed a leather-faced gunman against a desert-red background. RINGO, it said, in giant letters, and below, the fictitious author's name, Jeff McNa-



mara. Finally, the individual title of the book, one of many in that long running Western series. This one was *On The Road To Kansas City*.

Were they all like this?

Of course, there had never been a 'Jeff McNamara'. Ringo was a series of Hebrew-language Westerns, all written pseudonymously by starving young writers in a bygone Tel Aviv, who contributed besides it similar tales of space adventures, sexual titillation or soppy romance, as the occasion (and the publisher's cheque book) had called for. Achimwene rifled carefully through the rest of the books. All paperbacks, printed on cheap, thin pulp paper centuries before. How had they been preserved? Some of these he had only ever seen mentioned in auction catalogues; their existence, here, now, was nothing short of a miracle. There was a nurse romance; a murder mystery; a World War Two adventure; an erotic tale whose lurid cover made Achimwene blush. They were impossible, they could not possibly exist. "Where did you *find* them?" he said.

Ibrahim shrugged. "An opened Century Vault," he said.

Achimwene exhaled a sigh. He had heard of such things – subterranean safe-rooms, built in some long-ago war of the Jews, pockets of reinforced concrete shelters caught like bubbles all under the city surface. But he had never expected...

"Are there...many of them?" he said.

Ibrahim smiled. "Many," he said. Then, taking pity on Achimwene, said, "Many vaults, but most are inaccessible. Every now and then, construction work uncovers one... The owners called me, for they viewed much of it as rubbish. What, after all, would a modern person want with one of these?" and he gestured at the box, saying, "I saved them for you. The rest of the stuff is back in the Junkyard, but this was the only box of books."

"I can pay," Achimwene said. "I mean, I will work something out, I will borrow – " the thought stuck like a bone in his throat (as they said in those books) " – I will borrow from my sister."

But Ibrahim, to Achimwene's delight and incomprehension, waved him aside with a laugh. "Pay me the usual," he said. "After all, it is only a

box, and this is mere paper. It cost me nothing, and I have made my profit already. What extra value you place on it surely is a value of your own."

"But they are precious!" Achimwene said, shocked. "Collectors would pay..." Imagination failed him. Ibrahim smiled, and his smile was gentle. "You are the only collector I know," he said. "Can you afford what you think they're worth?"

"No," Achimwene said – whispered.

"Then pay only what I ask," Ibrahim said and, with a shake of his head, as at the folly of his fellow man, steered the horse into action. The patient beast beat its flank with its tail, shooing away flies, and ambled onwards. The boy, Ismail, remained there a moment longer, staring at the books. "Lots of old junk in the Vaults!" he said. He spread his arms wide to describe them. "I was there, I saw it! These...books?" He shot an uncertain look at Achimwene, then ploughed on: "And big flat square things called televisions, that we took for plastic scrap, and old guns, lots of old guns! But the Jews took those – why do you think they buried those things?" The boy's eyes, vat-grown haunting greens, stared at Achimwene. "So much *junk*," the boy said, at last, with a note of finality, and then, laughing, ran after the cart, jumping up on it with youthful ease.

Achimwene stared at the cart until it disappeared around the bend. Then, with the tenderness of a father picking up a new-born infant, he picked up the box of books and carried them the short way to his alcove.

Achimwene's life was about to change, but he did not yet know it. He spent the rest of the morning happily cataloguing, preserving and shelving the ancient books. Each lurid cover delighted him. He handled the books with only the tips of his fingers, turning the pages carefully, reverently. There were many faiths in Central Station, from Elronism to St Cohen to followers of Ogko, mixed amidst the larger populations – Jews to the north, Muslims to the south, a hundred offshoots of Christianity dotted all about like potted plants – but only Achimwene's faith called for this. The worship of old, obsolete books. The



worship, he liked to think, of history itself.

He spent the morning quite happily, therefore, with only one customer. For Achimwene was not alone in his – obsession? Fervour?

Others were like him. Mostly men, and mostly, like himself, broken in some fundamental fashion. They came from all over, pilgrims taking hesitant steps through the unfamiliar streets of the old neighbourhood, reaching at last Achimwene's alcove, a shop which had no name. They needed no sign. They simply knew.

There was an Armenian priest from Jerusalem who came once a month, a devotee of Hebrew pulps so obscure even Achimwene struggled with the conversation – romance chapbooks printed in twenty or thirty stapled pages at a time, filled with Zionist fervour and lovers' longings, so rare and fragile few remained in the world. There was a rare woman, whose name was Nur, who came from Damascus once a year, and whose speciality was the works of obscure poet and science fiction writer Lior Tirosh. There was a man from Haifa who collected erotica, and a man from the Galilee collecting mysteries.

"Achimwene? Shalom!"

Achimwene straightened in his chair. He had sat at his desk for some half an hour, typing, on what was his pride and joy, a rare collectors' item: a genuine, Hebrew typewriter. It was his peace and his escape, in the quiet times, to sit at his desk and pen, in the words of those old, vanished pulp writers, similarly exciting narratives of derring-do, rescues, and escapes.

"Shalom, Gideon," he said, sighing a little. The man, who hovered at the door, now came fully inside. He was a stooped figure, with long white hair, twinkling eyes, and a bottle of cheap arak held, like an offering, in one hand.

"Got glasses?"

"Sure..."

Achimwene brought out two glasses, neither too clean, and put them on the desk. The man, Gideon, motioned with his head at the typewriter. "Writing again?" he said.

"You know," Achimwene said.

Hebrew was the language of his birth. The Joneses were once Nigerian immigrants. Some said they had come over on work visas, and stayed. Others that they had escaped some long-

forgotten civil war, had crossed the border illegally from Egypt, and stayed. One way or the other, the Joneses, like the Chongs, had lived in Central Station for generations.

Gideon opened the bottle, poured them both a drink. "Water?" Achimwene said.

Gideon shook his head. Achimwene sighed again and Gideon raised the glass, the liquid clear. "L'chaim," he said.

They clinked glasses. Achimwene drank, the arak burning his throat, the anis flavour tickling his nose. Made him think of his sister's shebeen. Said, "So, nu? What's new with you, Gideon?"

He'd decided, suddenly and with aching clarity, that he wouldn't share the new haul with Gideon. Would keep them to himself, a private secret, for just a little while longer. Later, perhaps, he'd sell one or two. But not yet. For the moment, they were his, and his alone.

They chatted, whiling away an hour or two. Two men old before their time, in a dark alcove, sipping arak, reminiscing of books found and lost, of bargains struck and the ones that got away. At last Gideon left, having purchased a minor Western, in what is termed, in those circles, Good Condition – that is, it was falling apart. Achimwene breathed out a sigh of relief, his head swimming from the arak, and returned to his typewriter. He punched an experimental *heh*, then a *nun*. He began to type.

The g.

The girl.

The girl was in trouble.

A crowd surrounded her. Excitable, their faces twisted in the light of their torches. They held stones, blades. They shouted a word, a name, like a curse. The girl looked at them, her delicate face frightened.

"Won't someone save me?" she cried. "A hero, a –"

Achimwene frowned in irritation for, from the outside, a commotion was rising, the noise disturbing his concentration. He listened, but the noise only grew louder and, with a sigh of irritation, he pulled himself upwards and went to the door.

Perhaps this is how lives change. A momen-



tary decision, the toss of a coin. He could have returned to his desk, completed his sentence, or chosen to tidy up the shelves, or make a cup of coffee. He chose to open the door instead.

They are dangerous things, doors, Ogko had once said. You never knew what you'd find on the other side of one.

Achimwene opened the door and stepped outside.

The g.

The girl.

The girl was in trouble.

This much Achimwene saw, though for the moment, the *why* of it escaped him.

This is what he saw:

The crowd was composed of people Achimwene knew. Neighbours, cousins, acquaintances. He thought he saw young Yan there, and his fiancé, Youssou (who was Achimwene's second cousin); the greengrocer from around the corner; some adaptoplant dwellers he knew by sight if not name; and others. They were just people. They were of Central Station.

The girl wasn't.

Achimwene had never seen her before. She was slight of frame. She walked with a strange gait, as though unaccustomed to the gravity. Her face was narrow, indeed delicate. Her hair had been done in some otherworldly fashion, it was woven into dreadlocks that moved slowly, even sluggishly, above her head, and an ancient name rose in Achimwene's mind.

Medusa.

The girl's panicked eyes turned, looking. For just a moment, they found his. But her look did not (as Medusa's was said to) turn him to stone.

She turned away.

The crowd surrounded her in a semi-circle. Her back was to Achimwene. The crowd – the word *mob* flashed through Achimwene's mind uneasily – was excited, restless. Some held stones in their hands, but uncertainly, as though they were not sure why, or what they were meant to do with them. A mood of ugly energy animated them. And now Achimwene could hear a shouted word, a name, rising and falling in different intonations as the girl turned, and turned, helplessly seeking escape.

"Shambleau!"

The word sent a shiver down Achimwene's back (a sensation he had often read about in the pulps, yet seldom if ever experienced in real life). It have rise to vague, menacing images, desolate Martian landscapes, isolated kibbutzim on the Martian tundra, red sunsets, the colour of blood.

"Strigoi!"

And there it was, that other word, a word conjuring, as though from thin air, images of brooding mountains, dark castles, bat-shaped shadows fleeing on the winds against a blood-red, setting sun... Images of an ageless Count, of teeth elongating in a hungry skull, sinking to touch skin, to drain blood...

"Shambleau!"

"Get back! Get back to where you came from!"

"Leave her alone!"

The cry pierced the night. The mob milled, confused. The voice like a blade had cut through the day and the girl, startled and surprised, turned this way and that, searching for the source of that voice.

Who said it?

Who dared the wrath of the mob?

With a sense of reality cleaving in half, Achimwene, almost with a slight *frisson*, a delicious shiver of recognition, realised that it was he, himself, who had spoken.

Had, indeed, stepped forward from his door, a little hunched figure facing this mob of relatives and acquaintances and, even, perhaps, a few friends. "Leave her alone," he said again, savouring the words, and for once, perhaps for the first time in his life, people listened to him. A silence had descended. The girl, caught between her tormentors and this mysterious new figure, seemed uncertain.

"Oh, it's Achimwene," someone said, and somebody else suddenly, crudely laughed, breaking the silence.

"She's Shambleau," someone else said, and the first speaker (he couldn't quite see who it was) said, "Well, she'd be no harm to *him*."

That crude laughter again and then, as if by some unspoken agreement, or command, the crowd began, slowly, to disperse.

Achimwene found that his heart was beating fast; that his palms sweated; that his eyes devel-



oped a sudden itch. He felt like sneezing. The girl, slowly, floated over to him. They were of the same height. She looked into his eyes. Her eyes were a deep clear blue, vat-grown. They regarded each other as the rest of the mob dispersed. Soon they were left alone, in that quiet street, with Achimwene's back to the door of his shop.

She regarded him quizzically; her lips moved without sound, her eyes flicked up and down, scanning him. She looked confused, then shocked. She took a step back.

"No, wait!" he said.

"You are...you are not..."

He realised she had been trying to communicate with him. His silence had baffled her. Repelled her, most likely. He was a cripple. He said, "I have no node."

"How is that...possible?"

He laughed, though there was no humour in it. "It is not that unusual, here, on Earth," he said.

"You know I am not –" she said, and hesitated, and he said, "From here? I guessed. You are from Mars?"

A smile twisted her lips, for just a moment. "The asteroids," she admitted.

"What is it like, in space?" Excitement animated him. She shrugged. "Olsem difren," she said, in the pidgin of the asteroids.

*The same, but different.*

They stared at each other, two strangers, her vat-grown eyes against his natural-birth ones. "My name is Achimwene," he said.

"Oh."

"And you are?"

That same half-smile twisting her lips. He could tell she was bewildered by him. Repelled. Something inside him fluttered, like a caged bird dying of lack of oxygen.

"Carmel," she said, softly. "My name is Carmel."

He nodded. The bird was free, it was beating its wings inside him. "Would you like to come in?" he said. He gestured at his shop. The door, still standing half open.

Decisions splitting quantum universes... She bit her lip. There was no blood. He noticed her canines, then. Long and sharp. Unease took him again. Truth in the old stories? A Shamblau? Here?

"A cup of tea?" he said, desperately.

She nodded, distractedly. She was still trying to speak to him, he realised. She could not understand why he wasn't replying.

"I am un-noded," he said again. Shrugged. "It is –"

"Yes," she said.

"Yes?"

"Yes, I would like to come in. For...tea." She stepped closer to him. He could not read the look in her eyes. "Thank you," she said, in her soft voice, that strange accent. "For...you know."

"Yes." He grinned, suddenly, feeling bold, almost invincible. "It's nothing."

"Not...nothing." Her hand touched his shoulder, briefly, a light touch. Then she had gone past him and disappeared through the half-open door.

.....  
The shelves inside were arranged by genre.

Romance.

Mystery.

Detection.

Adventure.

And so on.

.....  
Life wasn't like that neat classification system, Achimwene had come to realise. Life was half-completed plots abandoned, heroes dying half-way along their quests, loves requited and un-, some fading inexplicably, some burning short and bright. There was a story of a man who fell in love with a vampire...

.....  
Carmel was fascinated by him, but increasingly distant. She did not understand him. He had no taste to him, nothing she could sink her teeth into. Her fangs. She was a predator, she needed *feed*, and Achimwene could not provide it to her.

That first time, when she had come into his shop, had run her fingers along the spines of ancient books, fascinated, shy: "We had books, on the asteroid," she admitted, embarrassed, it seemed, by the confession of a shared history. "On Nungai Merurun, we had a library of physical books, they had come in one of the ships, once, a great-uncle traded something for them—" leaving Achimwene with dreams of going into space, of visiting this Ng. Merurun, discovering



a priceless treasure hidden away.

Lamely, he had offered her tea. He brewed it on the small primus stove, in a dented saucepan, with fresh mint leaves in the water. Stirred sugar into the glasses. She had looked at the tea in incomprehension, concentrating. It was only later he realised she was trying to communicate with him again.

She frowned, shook her head. She was shaking a little, he realised. "Please," he said. "Drink."

"I don't," she said. "You're not." She gave up.

Achimwene often wondered what the Conversation was like. He knew that, wherever he passed, nearly anything he saw or touched was noded. Humans, yes, but also plants, robots, appliances, walls, solar panels – nearly everything was connected, in an ever-expanding, organically growing Aristocratic Small World network, that spread out, across Central Station, across Tel Aviv and Jaffa, across the interwoven entity that was Palestine/Israel, across that region called the Middle East, across Earth, across trans-solar space and beyond, where the lone Spiders sang to each other as they built more nodes and hubs, expanded farther and farther their intricate web. He knew a human was surrounded, every living moment, by the constant hum of other humans, other minds, an endless conversation going on in ways Achimwene could not conceive of. His own life was silent. He was a node of one. He moved his lips. Voice came. That was all. He said, "You are strigoi."

"Yes." Her lips twisted in that half-smile. "I am a monster."

"Don't say that." His heart beat fast. He said, "You're beautiful."

Her smile disappeared. She came closer to him, the tea forgotten. She leaned into him. Put her lips against his skin, against his neck, he felt her breath, the lightness of her lips on his hot skin. Sudden pain bit into him. She had fastened her lips over the wound, her teeth piercing his skin. He sighed. "Nothing!" she said. She pulled away from him abruptly. "It is like... I don't know!" She shook. He realised she was frightened. He touched the wound on his neck. He had felt nothing. "Always, to buy love, to buy obedience, to buy worship, I must feed," she said, matter-of-factly. "I drain them of their precious data,

bleed them for it, and pay them in dopamine, in ecstasy. But you have no storage, no broadcast, no firewall... *there is nothing there*. You are like a simulacra," she said. The word pleased her. "A *simulacra*," she repeated, softly. "You have the appearance of a man but there is nothing behind your eyes. You do not broadcast."

"That's ridiculous," Achimwene said, anger flaring, suddenly. "I speak. You can hear me. I have a mind. I can express my –"

But she was only shaking her head, and shivering. "I'm hungry," she said. "I need to feed."

There were willing victims in Central Station. The bite of a strigoi gave pleasure. More – it conferred status on the victim, bragging rights. There had never been strigoi on Earth. It made Achimwene nervous.

He found himself living in one of his old books. He was the one to arrange Carmel's feeding, select her victims, who paid for the privilege. Achimwene, to his horror, discovered he had become a middleman. The bag man.

There was something repulsive about it all, as well as a strange, shameful excitement. There was no sex: sex was not a part of it, although it could be. Carmel leech knowledge – memories – stored sensations – anything – pure uncut data from her victims, her fangs fastening on their neck, injecting dopamine into their blood as her node broke their inadequate protections, smashed their firewalls and their security, and bled them dry.

"Where do you come from?" he once asked her, as they lay on his narrow bed, the window open and the heat making them sweat, and she told him of Ng. Merurun, the tiny asteroid where she grew up, and how she ran away, on board the *Emaciated Messiah*, where a Shamb-leau attacked her, and passed on the virus, or the sickness, whatever it was.

"And how did you come to be here?" he said, and sensed, almost before he spoke, her unease, her reluctance to answer. Jealousy flared in him then, and he could not say why.

His sister came to visit him. She walked into the bookshop as he sat behind the desk, typing. He was writing less and less, now; his new life

seemed to him a kind of novel.

"Achimwene," she said.

He raised his head. "Miriam," he said, heavily.

They did not get along.

"The girl, Carmel. She is with you?"

"I let her stay," he said, carefully.

"Oh, Achimwene, you are a fool!" she said.

Her boy – their sister's boy – Kranki – was with her. Achimwene regarded him uneasily. The boy was vat-grown – had come from the birthing clinics – his eyes were Armani-trademark blue. "Hey, Kranki," Achimwene said.

"Anggkel," the boy said – *uncle*, in the pidgin of the asteroids. "Yu olsem wanem?"

"I gud," Achimwene said.

*How are you? I am well.*

"Fren blong mi Ismail I stap aotside," Kranki said. "I stret hemi kam insaed?"

*My friend Ismail is outside. Is it OK if he comes in?*

"I stret," Achimwene said.

Miriam blinked. "Ismail," she said. "Where did you come from?"

Kranki had turned, appeared, to all intents and purposes, to play with an invisible playmate. Achimwene said, carefully, "There is no one there."

"Of course there is," his sister snapped. "It's Ismail, the Jaffa boy."

Achimwene shook his head.

"Listen, Achimwene. The girl. Do you know why she came here?"

"No."

"She followed Boris."

"Boris," Achimwene said. "Your Boris?"

"My Boris," she said.

"She knew him before?"

"She knew him on Mars. In Tong Yun City."

"I...see."

"You see nothing, Achi. You are blind like a worm." Old words, still with the power to hurt him. They had never been close, somehow. He said, "What do you want, Miriam?"

Her face softened. "I do not want... I do not want her to hurt you."

"I am a grown-up," he said. "I can take care of myself."

"Achi, like you ever could!"

Could that be affection, in her voice? It

sounded like frustration. Miriam said, "Is she here?"

"Kranki," Achimwene said, "who are you playing with?"

"Ismail," Kranki said, pausing in the middle of telling a story to someone only he could see.

"He's not here," Achimwene said.

"Sure he is. He's right here."

Achimwene formed his lips into an O of understanding. "Is he virtual?" he said.

Kranki shrugged. "I guess," he said. He clearly felt uncomfortable with – or didn't understand – the question. Achimwene let it go.

His sister said, "I like the girl, Achi."

It took him by surprise. "You've met her?"

"She has a sickness. She needs help."

"I am helping her!"

But his sister only shook her head.

"Go away, Miriam," he said, feeling suddenly tired, depressed. His sister said, "Is she here?"

"She is resting."

Above his shop there was a tiny flat, accessible by narrow, twisting stairs. It wasn't much but it was home. "Carmel?" his sister called. "Carmel!"

There was a sound above, as of someone moving. Then a lack of sound. Achimwene watched his sister standing impassively. Realised she was talking, in the way of other people, with Carmel. Communicating in a way that was barred to him. Then normal sound again, feet on the stairs, and Carmel came into the room.

"Hi," she said, awkwardly. She came and stood closer to Achimwene, then took his hand in hers. The feel of her small, cold fingers in between his hands startled him and made a feeling of pleasure spread throughout his body, like warmth in the blood. Nothing more was said. The physical action itself was an act of speaking.

Miriam nodded.

Then Kranki startled them all.

Carmel had spent the previous night in the company of a woman. Achimwene had known there was sex involved, not just feeding. He had told himself he didn't mind. When Carmel came back she had smelled of sweat and sex and blood. She moved lethargically, and he knew she was drunk on data. She had tried to describe it to him once, but he didn't really understand it,



what it was like.

He had lain there on the narrow bed with her and watched the moon outside, and the floating lanterns with their rudimentary intelligence. He had his arm around the sleeping Carmel, and he had never felt happier.

Kranki turned and regarded Carmel. He whispered something to the air – to the place Ismail was standing, Achimwene guessed. He giggled at the reply and turned to Carmel.

"Are you a *vampire*?" he said.

"Kranki!"

At the horrified look on Miriam's face, Achimwene wanted to laugh. Carmel said, "No, it's all right –" in asteroid pidgin. *I stret nomo*.

But she was watching the boy intently. "Who is your friend?" she said, softly.

"It's Ismail. He lives in Jaffa on the hill."

"And what is he?" Carmel said. "What are you?"

The boy didn't seem to understand the question. "He is him. I am me. We are..." He hesitated.

"Nakaimas..." Carmel whispered. The sound of her voice made Achimwene shiver. That same cold run of ice down his spine, like in the old books, like when Ringo the Gunslinger met a horror from beyond the grave on the lonesome prairies.

He knew the word, though never understood the way people used it. It meant black magic, but also, he knew, it meant to somehow, impossibly, transcend the networks, that thing they called the Conversation.

"Kranki..." The warning tone in Miriam's voice was unmistakable. But neither Kranki nor Carmel paid her any heed. "I could show you," the boy said. His clear, blue eyes seemed curious, guileless. He stepped forward and stood directly in front of Carmel and reached out his hand, pointing finger extended. Carmel, momentarily, hesitated. Then she, too, reached forward and, finger extended, touched its tip to the boy's own.

It is, perhaps, the prerogative of every man or woman to imagine, and thus force a *shape*, a *meaning*, onto that wild and meandering narrative of their lives, by choosing genre. A princess

is rescued by a prince; a vampire stalks a victim in the dark; a student becomes the master. A circle is completed. And so on.

It was the next morning that Achimwene's story changed, for him. It had been a Romance, perhaps, of sorts. But now it became a Mystery.

Perhaps they chose it, by tacit agreement, as a way to bind them, to make this curious relationship, this joining of two ill-fitted individuals somehow work. Or perhaps it was curiosity that motivated them after all, that earliest of motives, the most human and the most suspect, the one that had led Adam to the Tree, in the dawn of story.

The next morning Carmel came down the stairs. Achimwene had slept in the bookshop that night, curled up in a thin blanket on top of a mattress he had kept by the wall and which was normally laden with books. The books, pushed aside, formed an untidy wall around him as he slept, an alcove within an alcove.

Carmel came down. Her hair moved sluggishly around her skull. She wore a thin cotton shift; he could see how thin she was.

Achimwene said, "Tell me what happened yesterday."

Carmel shrugged. "Is there any coffee?"

"You know where it is."

He sat up, feeling self-conscious and angry. Pulling the blanket over his legs. Carmel went to the primus stove, filled the pot with water from the tap, added spoons of black coffee carelessly. Set it to cook.

"The boy is...a sort of *strigoi*," she said. "Maybe. Yes. No. I don't know."

"What did he do?"

"He gave me something. He took something away. A memory. Mine or someone else's. It's no longer there."

"What did he give you?"

"Knowledge. That he exists."

"Nakaimas."

"Yes." She laughed, a sound as bitter as the coffee. "Black magic. Like me. Not like me."

"You were a weapon," he said. She turned, sharply. There were two coffee cups on the table. Glass on varnished wood. "What?"

"I read about it."

"Always your *books*."

He couldn't tell by her tone how she meant it. He said, "There are silences in your Conversation. Holes." Could not quite picture it, to him there was only a silence. Said, "The books have answers."

She poured coffee, stirred sugar into the glasses. Came over and sat beside him, her side pressing into his. Passed him a cup. "Tell me," she said.

He took a sip. The coffee burned his tongue. Sweet. He began to talk quickly. "I read up on the condition. Strigoi. Shamblau. There are references from the era of the Shangri-La Virus, contemporary accounts. The Kunming Labs were working on genetic weapons, but the war ended before the strain could be deployed – they sold it off-world, it went loose, it spread. It never worked right. There are hints – I need access to a bigger library. Rumours. Cryptic footnotes."

"Saying what?"

"Suggesting a deeper purpose. Or that strigoi was but a side-effect of something else. A secret purpose..."

Perhaps they wanted to believe. Everyone needs a mystery.

She stirred beside him. Turned to face him. Smiled. It was perhaps the first time she ever truly smiled at him. Her teeth were long, and sharp.

"We could find out," she said.

"Together," he said. He drank his coffee, to hide his excitement. But he knew she could tell.

"We could be detectives."

"Like Judge Dee," he said.

"Who?"

"Some detective."

"Book detective," she said, dismissively.

"Like Bill Glimmung, then," he said. Her face lit up. For a moment she looked very young. "I love those stories," she said.

Even Achimwene had seen Glimmung features. They had been made in 2D, 3D, full-immersion, as scent narratives, as touch-tapestry – Martian Hardboiled, they called the genre, the Phobos Studios cranked out hundreds of them over decades if not centuries, Elvis Mandela had made the character his own.

"Like Bill Glimmung, then," she said solemnly, and he laughed.

"Like Glimmung," he said.

And so the lovers, by complicit agreement, became detectives.

MARTIAN HARDBOILED, genre of. Flourished in the CENTURY OF DRAGON. Most prominent character: Bill GLIMMUNG, played most memorably by Elvis MANDELA (for which see separate entry). The genre is well-known, indeed notorious, for the liberal use of sex and violence, transplanted from old EARTH (also see MANHOME; HUMANITY PRIME) hard-boiled into a Martian setting, sometimes realistically-portrayed, often with implicit or explicit elements of FANTASY.

While early stories stuck faithfully to the mean streets of TONG YUN CITY, with its triads, hafmek pushers and Israeli, Red Chinese and Red Soviet agents, later narratives took in off-world adventures, including in the BELT, the VENUSIAN NO-GO ZONE and the OUTER PLANETS. Elements of SOAP OPERA intruded as the narratives became ever more complex and on-going (see entry for long-running Martian soap CHAINS OF ASSEMBLY for separate discussion).

"There was something else," Carmel said.

Achimwene said, "What?"

They were walking the streets of old Central Station. The space port rose above them, immense and inscrutable. Carmel said, "When I came in. Came down." She shook her head in frustration and a solitary dreadlock snaked around her mouth, making her blow on it to move it away. "When I came to Earth."

Those few words evoked in Achimwene a nameless longing. So much to infer, so much suggested, to a man who had never left his home town. Carmel said, "I bought a new identity in Tong Yun, before I came. The best you could. From a Conch –"

Looking at him to see if he understood. Achimwene did. A Conch was a human who had been ensconced, welded into a permanent pod-cum-exoskeleton. He was only part human, had become part digital by extension. It was not



unsimilar, in some ways, to the eunuchs of old Earth. Achimwene said, "I see?" Carmel said, "It worked. When I passed through Central Station security I was allowed through, with no problems. The...the digitals did not pick up on my...nature. The fake ident was accepted."

"So?"

Carmel sighed, and a loose dreadlock tickled Achimwene's neck, sending a warmth rushing through him. "So is that likely?" she said. She stopped walking, then, when Achimwene stopped also, she started pacing. A floating lantern bobbed beside them for a few moments then, as though sensing their intensity, drifted away, leaving them in shadow. "There are no strigoi on Earth," Carmel said.

"How do we know for sure?" Achimwene said.

"It's one of those things. Everyone knows it."

Achimwene shrugged. "But *you're* here," he pointed out.

Carmel waved her finger; stuck it in his face. "And how likely is that?" she yelled, startling him. "I believed it worked, because I *wanted* to believe it. But surely they know! I am not human, Achi! My body is riddled with nodal filaments, exabytes of data, hostile protocols! You want to tell me they *didn't* know?"

Achimwene shook his head. Reached for her, but she pulled away from him. "What are you saying?" he said.

"They let me through." Her voice was matter of fact.

"Why?" Achimwene said. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know."

Achimwene chewed his lip. Intuition made a leap in his mind, neurons singing to neurons. "You think it is because of those children," he said.

Carmel stopped pacing. He saw how pale her face was, how delicate. "Yes," she said.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Then you must ask a digital," he said. "You must ask an Other."

She glared at him. "Why would they talk to me?" she said.

Achimwene didn't have an answer. "We can proceed the way we agreed," he said, a little

lamely. "We'll get the answers. Sooner or later, we'll figure it out, Carmel."

"How?" she said.

He pulled her to him. She did not resist. The words from an old book rose into Achimwene's mind, and with them the entire scene. "We'll get to the bottom of this," he said.

And so on a sweltering hot day Achimwene and the strigoi left Central Station, on foot, and shortly thereafter crossed the invisible barrier that separated the old neighbourhood from the city of Tel Aviv proper. Achimwene walked slowly; an electronic cigarette dangled from his lips, another vintage affectation, and the fedora hat he wore shaded him from the sun even as his sweat drenched into the brim of the hat. Beside him Carmel was cool in a light blue dress. They came to Allenby Street and followed it towards the Carmel Market – "It's like my name," Carmel said, wonderingily.

"It is an old name," Achimwene said. But his attention was elsewhere.

"Where are we going?" Carmel said. Achimwene smiled, white teeth around the metal cigarette. "Every detective," he said, "needs an informant."

Picture, then, Allenby. Not the way it was, but the way it is. Surprisingly little has changed. It was a long, dirty street, with dark shops selling knock-off products with the air of disuse upon them. Carmel dawdled outside a magic shop. Achimwene bargained with a fruit juice seller and returned with two cups of fresh orange juice, handing one to Carmel. They passed a bakery where cream-filled pastries vied for their attention. They passed a Church of Robot node where a rusting preacher tried to get their attention with a sad distracted air. They passed shawarma stalls thick with the smell of cumin and lamb fat. They passed a road-sweeping machine that warbled at them pleasantly, and a recruitment centre for the Martian Kibbutz Movement. They passed a gaggle of black-clad Orthodox Jews; like Achimwene, they were unnoded.

Carmel looked this way and that, smelling, looking, *feeding*, Achimwene knew, on pure unadulterated *feed*. Something he could not experience, could not know, but knew, neverthe-

less, that it was there, invisible yet ever present. Like God. The lines from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish floated in his head. Something about the invisibles. "Look," Carmel said, smiling. "A bookshop."

Indeed it was. They were coming closer to the market now and the throng of people intensified, and solar buses crawled like insects, with their wings spread high, along the Allenby road, carrying passengers, and the smell of fresh vegetables, of peppers and tomatoes, and the sweet strong smell of oranges, too, filled the air. The bookshop was, in fact, a yard, open to the skies, the books under awnings, and piled up, here and there, in untidy mountains – it was the sort of shop that would have no prices, and where you'd always have to ask for the price, which depended on the owner, and his mood, and on the weather and the alignment of the stars.

The owner in question was indeed standing in the shade of the long, metal bookcases lining up one wall. He was smoking a cigar and its overpowering aroma filled the air and made Carmel sneeze. The man looked up and saw them. "Achimwene," he said, without surprise. Then he squinted and said, in a lower voice, "I heard you got a nice batch recently."

"Word travels," Achimwene said, complacently. Carmel, meanwhile, was browsing aimlessly, picking up fragile-looking paper books and magazines, replacing them, picking up others. Achimwene saw, at a glance, early editions of Yehuda Amichai, a first edition Yoav Avni, several worn *Ringo* paperbacks he already had, and a Lior Tirosh semizdat collection. He said, "Shimshon, what do you know about vampires?"

"Vampires?" Shimshon said. He took a thoughtful pull on his cigar. "In the literary tradition? There is *Neshikat Ha'mavet Shel Dracula*, by Dan Shocker, in the Horror series from nineteen seventy two – "*Dracula's Death Kiss*" – or Gal Amir's *Laila Adom* – "*Red Night*" – possibly the first Hebrew vampire novel, or Vered Tochterman's *Dam Kachol* – "*Blue Blood*" – from around the same period. Didn't think it was particularly your area, Achimwene." Shimshon grinned. "But I'd be happy to sell you a copy. I think I have a signed Tochterman somewhere. Expensive, though. Unless you want to trade..."

"No," Achimwene said, although regretfully. "I'm not looking for a pulp, right now. I'm looking for non-fiction."

Shimshon's eyebrows rose and he regarded Achimwene without the grin. "Mil. Hist?" he said, uneasily. "Robotniks? The Nosferatu Code?"

Achimwene regarded him, uncertain. "The what?" he said.

But Shimshon was shaking his head. "I don't deal in that sort of thing," he said. "*Verboten*. Hagiratech. Go away, Achimwene. Go back to Central Station. Shop's closed." He turned and dropped the cigar and stepped on it with his foot. "You, love!" he said. "Shop's closing. Are you going to buy that book? No? Then put it down."

Carmel turned, wounded dignity flashing in her green eyes. "Then take it!" she said, shoving a (priceless, Achimwene thought) copy of Lior Tirosh's first – and only – poetry collection, *Remnants of God*, into Shimshon's hands. She hissed, a sound Achimwene suspected was not only in the audible range but went deeper, in the non-sound of digital communication, for Shimshon's face went pale and he said, "Get... out!" in a strangled whisper as Carmel smiled at him, flashing her small, sharp teeth.

They left. They crossed the street and stood outside a cheap cosmetics surgery booth, offering wrinkles erased or tentacles grafted, next to a handwritten sign that said GONE FOR LUNCH. "Verboten?" Achimwene said. "Hagiratech?"

"Forbidden," Carmel said. "The sort of wild-tech that ends up on Jettisoned, from the exodus ships."

"What you are," he said.

"Yes. I looked, myself, you know. But it is like you said. Holes in the Conversation. Did we learn nothing useful?"

"No," he said. Then, "Yes."

She smiled. "Which is it?"

*Military history*, Shimshon had said. And no one knew better than him how to classify a thing into its genre. And – *robotniks*.

"We need to find us," Achimwene said, "an ex-soldier." He smiled without humour. "Better brush up on your Battle Yiddish," he said.



"Ezekiel."

"Achimwene."

"I brought...vodka. And spare parts." He had bought them in Tel Aviv, on Allenby, at great expense. Robotnik parts were not easy to come by.

Ezekiel looked at him without expression. His face was metal smooth. It never smiled. His body was mostly metal. It was rusted. It creaked when he walked. He ignored the proffered offerings. Turned his head. "You brought *her*?" he said. "*Here*?"

Carmel stared at the robotnik in curiosity. They were at the heart of the old station, a burned down ancient bus platform open to the sky. Achimwene knew platforms continued down below, that the robotniks – ex-soldiers, cyborged humans, present day beggars and dealers in Crucifixion and stolen goods – made their base down there. But there he could not go. Ezekiel met him above-ground. A drum with fire burning, the flames reflected in the dull metal of the robotnik's face. "I saw your kind," Carmel said. "On Mars. In Tong Yun City. Begging."

"And I saw *your* kind," the robotnik said. "In the sands of the Sinai, in the war. Begging. Begging for their lives, as we decapitated them and stuck a stake through their hearts and watched them die."

"Jesus Elron, Ezekiel!"

The robotnik ignored his exclamation. "I had heard," he said. "That one came. Here. *Strigoi*. But I did not believe! The defence systems would have picked her up. Should have eliminated her."

"They didn't," Achimwene said.

"Yes..."

"Do you know why?"

The robotnik stared at him. Then he gave a short laugh and accepted the bottle of vodka. "You guess *they* let her through? The Others?"

Achimwene shrugged. "It's the only answer that makes sense."

"And you want to know why."

"Call me curious."

"I call you a fool," the robotnik said, without malice. "And you not even noded. She still has an effect on you?"

"*She* has a name," Carmel said, acidly. Ezekiel ignored her. "You're a collector of old stories,

aren't you, Achimwene," he said. "Now you came to collect mine?"

Achimwene just shrugged. The robotnik took a deep slug of vodka and said, "So, nu? What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about Nosferatu," Achimwene said.

SHANGRI-LA VIRUS, the. Bio-weapon developed in the GOLDEN TRIANGLE and used during the UNOFFICIAL WAR. Transmission mechanisms included sexual intercourse (99%–100%), by air (50%–60%), by water (30%–35%), through saliva (15%–20%) and by touch (5%–6%). Used most memorably during the LONG CHENG ATTACK (for which also see LAOS; RAVENZ; THE KLAN KLANDESTINE). The weapon curtailed aggression in humans, making them peaceable and docile. All known samples destroyed in the Unofficial War, along with the city of Long Cheng.

"We never found out for sure where Nosferatu came from," Ezekiel said. It was quiet in the abandoned shell of the old station. Overhead a sub-orbital came in to land, and from the adaptoplant neighbourhoods ringing the old stone buildings the sound of laughter could be heard, and someone playing the guitar. "It had been introduced into the battlefield during the Third Sinai Campaign, by one side, or the other, or both." He fell quiet. "I am not even sure who we were fighting for," he said. He took another drink of vodka. The almost pure alcohol served as fuel for the robotniks. Ezekiel said, "At first we paid it little enough attention. We'd find victims on dawn patrols. Men, women, robotniks. Wandering the dunes or the Red Sea shore, dazed, their minds leeches clean. The small wounds on their necks. Still. They were alive. Not ripped to shreds by Jub Jubs. But the data. We began to notice the enemy knew where to find us. Knew where we went. We began to be afraid of the dark. To never go out alone. Patrol in teams. But worse. For the ones who were bitten, and carried back by us, had turned, became the enemy's own weapon. Nosferatu."

Achimwene felt sweat on his forehead, took a step away from the fire. Away from them, the

floating lanterns bobbed in the air. Someone cried in the distance and the cry was suddenly and inexplicably cut off, and Achimwene wondered if the street sweeping machines would find another corpse the next morning, lying in the gutter outside a shebeen or No. 1 Pin Street, the most notorious of the drug dens-cum-brothels of Central Station.

"They rose within our ranks. They fed in secret. Robotniks don't sleep, Achimwene. Not the way the humans we used to be did. But we do turn off. Shut-eye. And they preyed on us, bleeding out minds, feeding on our feed. Do you know what it is like?" The robotnik's voice didn't grow louder, but it carried. "We were human, once. The army took us off the battlefield, broken, dying. It grafted us into new bodies, made us into shiny, near-invulnerable killing machines. We had no legal rights, not any more. We were technically, and clinically, dead. We had few memories, if any, of what we once were. But those we had, we kept hold of, jealously. Hints to our old identity. The memory of feet in the rain. The smell of pine resin. A hug from a newborn baby whose name we no longer knew.

"And the *strigoi* were taking even those away from us."

Achimwene looked at Carmel, but she was looking nowhere, her eyes were closed, her lips pressed together. "We finally grew wise to it," Ezekiel said. "We began to hunt them down. If we found a victim we did not take them back. Not alive. We staked them, we cut off their heads, we burned the bodies. Have you ever opened a *strigoi's* belly, Achimwene?" He motioned at Carmel. "Want to know what her insides look like?"

"No," Achimwene said, but Ezekiel the robotnik ignored him. "Like cancer," he said. "Strigoi is like robotnik, it is a human body subverted, cyborged. She isn't human, Achimwene, however much you'd like to believe it. I remember the first one we cut open. The filaments inside. Moving. Still trying to spread. Nosferatu Protocol, we called it. What we had to do. Following the Nosferatu Protocol. Who created the virus? I don't know. Us. Them. The Kunming Labs. Someone. St Cohen only knows. All I know is how to kill them."

Achimwene looked at Carmel. Her eyes were open now. She was staring at the robotnik. "I didn't ask for this," she said. "I am not a *weapon*. There is no fucking war!"

"There was –"

"There were a lot of things!"

A silence. At last, Ezekiel stirred. "So what do you want?" he said. He sounded tired. The bottle of vodka was nearly finished. Achimwene said, "What more can you tell us?"

"Nothing, Achi. I can tell you nothing. Only to be careful." The robotnik laughed. "But it's too late for that, isn't it," he said.

Achimwene was arranging his books when Boris came to see him. He heard the soft footsteps and the hesitant cough and straightened up, dusting his hands from the fragile books, and looked at the man Carmel had come to Earth for.

"Achi."

"Boris."

He remembered him as a loose-limbed, gangly teenager. Seeing him like this was a shock. There was a thing growing on Boris' neck. It was flesh-coloured, but the colour was slightly off to the rest of Boris' skin. It seemed to breathe gently. Boris' face was lined, he was still thin but there was an unhealthy nature to his thinness. "I heard you were back," Achimwene said.

"My father," Boris said, as though that explained everything.

"And we always thought you were the one who got away," Achimwene said. Genuine curiosity made him add, "What was it like? In the Up and Out?"

"Strange," Boris said. "The same." He shrugged. "I don't know."

"So you are seeing my sister again."

"Yes."

"You've hurt her once before, Boris. Are you going to do it again?"

Boris opened his mouth, closed it again. He stood there, taking Achimwene back years. "I heard Carmel is staying with you," Boris said at last.

"Yes."

Again, an uncomfortable silence. Boris scanned the bookshelves, picked a book at random. "What's this?" he said.



"Be careful with that!"

Boris looked startled. He stared at the small hardcover in his hands. "That's a Captain Yuno," Achimwene said, proudly. "*Captain Yuno on a Dangerous Mission*, the second of the three Sagi novels. The least rare of the three, admittedly, but still...priceless."

Boris looked momentarily amused. "He was a kid taikonaut?" he said.

"Sagi envisioned a solar system teeming with intelligent alien life," Achimwene said, primly. "He imagined a world government, and the people of Earth working together in peace."

"No kidding. He must have been disappointed when –"

"This book is *pre-spaceflight*," Achimwene said. Boris whistled. "So it's old?"

"Yes."

"And valuable?"

"Very."

"How do you know all this stuff?"

"I read."

Boris put the book back on the shelf, carefully. "Listen, Achi –" he said.

"No," Achimwene said. "You listen. Whatever happened between you and Carmel is between you two. I won't say I don't care, because I'd be lying, but it is not my business. Do you have a claim on her?"

"What?" Boris said. "No. Achi, I'm just trying to –"

"To what?"

"To warn you. I know you're not used to..." Again he hesitated. Achimwene remembered Boris as someone of few words, even as a boy. Words did not come easy to him. "Not used to women?" Achimwene said, his anger tightly coiled.

Boris had to smile. "You have to admit –"

"I am not some, some –"

"She is not a woman, Achi. She's a strigoi."

Achimwene closed his eyes. Expelled breath. Opened his eyes again and regarded Boris levelly. "Is that all?" he said.

Boris held his eyes. After a moment, he seemed to deflate. "Very well," he said.

"Yes."

"I guess I'll see you."

"I guess."

"Please pass my regards to Carmel."

Achimwene nodded. Boris, at last, shrugged. Then he turned and left the store.

There comes a time in a man's life when he realises stories are lies. Things do not end neatly. The enforced narratives a human impinges on the chaotic mess that is life become empty labels, like the dried husks of corn such as are thrown down, in the summer months, from the adaptoplant neighbourhoods high above Central Station, to litter the streets below.

He woke up in the night and the air was humid, and there was no wind. The window was open. Carmel was lying on her side, asleep, her small, naked body tangled up in the sheets. He watched her chest rise and fall, her breath even. A smear of what might have been blood on her lips. "Carmel?" he said, but quietly, and she didn't hear. He rubbed her back. Her skin was smooth and warm. She moved sleepily under his hand, murmured something he didn't catch, and settled down again.

Achimwene stared out of the window, at the moon rising high above Central Station. A mystery was no longer a mystery once it was solved. What difference did it make how Carmel had come to be there, with him, at that moment? It was not facts that mattered, but feelings. He stared at the moon, thinking of that first human to land there, all those years before, that first human footprint in that alien dust.

Inside Carmel was asleep and he was awake, outside dogs howled up at the moon and, from somewhere, the image came to Achimwene of a man in a spacesuit turning at the sound, a man who does a little tap dance on the moon, on the dusty moon.

He lay back down and held on to Carmel and she turned, trustingly, and settled into his arms.

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'The Book Seller' is the latest story set in Lavie's Central Station milieu, following on from 'Strigoi' in issue 242. He also has a story ('What we talk about when we talk about z-----') in the current issue of our sister magazine *Black Static* (issue 32, out now). Lavie's novel *Osama* recently won a 2012 World Fantasy Award, and is out now as a mass market paperback. Visit his website at [lavietidhar.wordpress.com](http://lavietidhar.wordpress.com) for more information.





# HELEN JACKSON

# BUILD GUIDE

**T**he new apprentice was a slight, childish figure, maybe 150cm tall and massing about 50 kilos. She clung to a grabrail and glared at us. She looked nauseous. She wasn't what I'd hoped for.

The Gaffer said what we were all thinking: "Great. They've sent us a little girl. She's no good to us. Did you know about this, Peggy?"

I shook my head and sighed. I was too old to wrangle teenagers. The Earthside contractor we worked for had embraced the New Modern Apprentice scheme. They got government subsidies, tax breaks, and good PR. We got a stream of unemployed – possibly unemployable – youngsters. This was the youngest yet.

The Gaffer spoke to the kid. "What's your name, girlie?"

"Grace Benjamin Murray, *gramps*," the kid said, pointedly. She spoke with spirit, despite still being doped up from the shuttle journey, in a pronounced South London accent. Eltham, maybe, or Kidbrooke. One of the rougher estates. The Gaffer didn't rise to the challenge.

"How old are you, Grace Benjamin Murray? Fifteen?"

Murray kept her head up. "I'm nearly nineteen and I've been through full training."

Diego snorted. "What, six weeks groundside? Think that'll help you up here, nearly-nineteen?"

Murray looked fit to explode. She reminded me of myself at that age: scrappy and determined. I stepped in before she could say something she'd regret.

"Peggy Varus, foreman's assistant," I introduced myself. "You'll be bunking in with me. The Gaffer's Rasmus Larsson, Mr Larsson to you." I nodded at the Gaffer and hoisted a thumb Diego's way. "He's Diego."

"Mr Fernandez to you."

"In your dreams," she said, letting go of her grabrail and attempting to step forward. As she floated, her face went distinctly green. I barely got the sick bag to her in time.

The Gaffer looked disgusted. Diego burst out laughing. I hustled the kid away before she could get herself in more trouble.

"Can we keep her inside?" asked the Gaffer. "I haven't got time to babysit."

We were running through the week's build guide for the *n*th time. Although we'd each be fed our step-by-steps on the Head Up Displays, it helped to know the full operation by heart.

"I don't see how," I said, pausing the build guide at step five and pointing at the holo. "It's a four person job from here onwards."

We'd received a steelwork delivery along with our problem child and were ready to move onto the main truss extension. We'd also received a new boatload of tourists. The hotel accommodated fifty sightseers, keen to view the Earth from space. It'd take twice that many once we completed the new wing.

"Could we adjust to use the three of us plus an

arm?" asked the Gaffer.

"Not a chance. Roboarm-1 will be doing the heavy lifting. Diego'll be attached to R-2 in order to come in from the offside, and R-3's giving rides to the visitors." The Gaffer looked thoughtful. I headed him off: "We'll never get permission to requisition R-3."

He nodded acknowledgement. We'd asked before, without success. "Can we reprogramme the build to use a maximum of three people?"

"I already looked at it. Today's on the critical path: we'd lose a lot of time."

This wasn't quite true. I could see a way of reprogramming, but it would affect the delivery schedules for several suppliers I wanted to keep happy. I knew the Gaffer wouldn't question me.

He frowned. "Okay, we'll take her out. But I don't want her causing trouble. Watch her, Peggy."

I contemplated Murray as we suited up. She was over her space-sickness and handled her suit fasteners with confidence. It looked as if she'd stayed awake during training.

"Hey, nearly-nineteen," said Diego. "D'you know one end of a podger wrench from the other?"

Murray pulled the wrench out of her tool belt. "Sure do. Used to have these in the gang." She paused and lifted it in a raised fist, spike end forward. "Pointy end for stabbing, blunt end for hitting, right?" Diego blanched. The Gaffer pushed forward and grabbed it from her.

"No way were you in a gang, girlie. Stow this and stop menacing Diego."

Murray took the podger back, but didn't replace it on her belt immediately. She floated it near her hand. "Was too. Steel erector gang. Started straight from school. I'd done eight months when the recession hit and we got laid off. I know what I'm doing with a podger."

"Oh yeah?" said Diego. "Fifty quid says every nut you put on today needs tightening by a real erector."

"Give over, Diego," I said. "That's not a fair bet." It takes several shifts to figure out how to apply the right torque in microgravity, and fifty pounds was more than an apprentice's daily wage. I expected the Gaffer to intervene. He stayed quiet.



"Too right it isn't fair," said Murray. "It'll be the easiest fifty I've ever earned. Wanna make it a hundred?" She held out her gloved hand to shake on the bet, an awkward Earth gesture that made Diego sneer.

"Helmets on," said the Gaffer.

I got a glimpse of Murray's resolute expression before the gold visor hid it. I admired her commitment to making a fast buck. She'd go far, if she could master her overconfidence. Maybe I should take an interest in her?

"Clip in, Murray," I said, passing her a line. "Attach the other end to the red rail as soon as you get outside. Understand?" She nodded, hooked in, and looked back at me. Her body language said she expected something else. I waited.

"Where's my secondary line?" she asked. She really had been awake during training.

"We can't use secondary lines today. With the four of us, and the build order we've got, we'd get tangled with two lines each."

"Safety handbook says no-one's to go out without primary and secondary lines." Murray spoke quietly. She moved back, away from the airlock. She sounded even younger without her attitude.

The Gaffer entered the code to open the airlock inner door. As the release alert beeped, I did my best to sound reassuring.

"Construction Manager Caldwell set the build order. If she says it's safe, it's safe. We work without a secondary line all the time."

"But what if it breaks, or comes loose? Safety handbook says –"

"Safety handbook? Not so tough now, are you, nearly-nineteen?" said Diego.

Murray shut up, and pulled herself into the airlock with the rest of us. We exited on the off side of the space station. Diego and the Gaffer headed to their positions. I kept Murray near the airlock door. If she panicked I wanted to be able to stuff her back inside straight away.

"This is freaky," she said, floating a step away from the door. She didn't sound scared any more, she sounded awed. I could remember my first time well enough to know what she was experiencing. Space is different from the neutral buoyancy lab. Sure, the suit floats in the pool, but in space...

"I'm floating inside my suit!"

"How're you feeling? Any nausea? Headaches? Dizziness? Anything strange happening to your vision?"

She brought her legs up and pushed off, drifting until her line pulled taut. Over the radio, I could hear her laughter: bubbling glee rather than hysteria. Looked like she wasn't going to pass out on me. Next step, dealing with the view.

"Murray, pull yourself back in now." She didn't obey immediately, still caught up in the sensation of floating. I raised my voice a notch. "Murray!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm coming." She remembered enough of her training to grab hold of the line rather than using her legs to manoeuvre; I've seen plenty of apprentices floundering as they kicked off against nothing at all. Murray's return wasn't elegant or fast, but it wasn't bad. She had promise.

"We're going round to the Earth side. Use the green grabrails, hand over hand like this." I demonstrated. "Don't try to float. Stay behind me."

She kept up, until the Earth rose in her vision. I heard her indrawn breath. She stopped dead. I'd been expecting it – the view from Earth-Moon L5 is something special – and carried on moving steadily.

The planet was the only colour in the sky. There wasn't much cloud that day; big banks of white over the Americas, but vivid blue elsewhere, with the landmass of Europe clearly visible. I always liked being able to see England. I missed home.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I said. "It's a real challenge to ignore those visuals. This is where you have to remember your training and focus on the job you're here to do. Can you do that, Murray?"

She reached for the next grabrail and hauled herself forward. She'd almost caught up when she spoke. I swear I could hear the shrug in her voice.

"Where's the big deal? Seen it a million times."

She seemed to mean it. I stopped.

"Seeing it on a screen's hardly the same as being here."

She took her right hand off the rail and brought it up to her helmet. "Nah," she said, cheeky. "The view was better in the movies, without all this

Head Up Display crap getting in my face. Are we starting work or aren't we?"

I got moving. I'd noticed a similar attitude in the last apprentice. The way these kids took space for granted made me feel ancient. It was time I moved Earthside, if only I could find the right successor. If the company had had a decent pension plan, or I'd managed to skim enough, I'd have taken retirement years ago.

Diego was plugged on to Roboarm-2 when we reached our work point. The Gaffer got us started, steadily talking us through the build, step by step, reinforcing our HUD visuals, keeping everyone together.

The three of us worked well as a team. The Gaffer and I had been on the same crew for eleven years. I knew he'd make sure we got the job done, and he knew I'd deal with the paperwork without bothering him. Diego was into his third year with us and the Gaffer was training him well. Still, a fourth pair of hands – even clumsy hands – came in useful.

Construction Manager Caldwell had done a nice job of allocating tasks. For the first hour or so, Murray's role was restricted to nudging the position of steelwork lifted in by R-1. She'd had enough time in the neutral buoyancy pool to understand near-zero weight doesn't mean near-zero inertia. She did okay.

Her troubles started when she had to use tools. It took her nearly a quarter of an hour to get her first nut onto a bolt. She struggled with the gloves. It was painful to watch. When she'd finally got it tightened, I moved over to check it. It needed a finishing twist. So did the next one, and the next, much to Diego's delight.

"Looks like my drinks'll be on you tonight, nearly-nineteen."

Murray swore viciously and promptly got worse. She dropped her podger, grabbed for it with reflexes conditioned to Earth gravity and missed. It headed in the direction of the main hotel viewport. The Gaffer pushed out and snagged it.

"Take a breather and calm down," he said, before passing it back. "And, Diego, concentrate on your own work." Diego was working well. He and the arm operator had a smooth rhythm going; they made a difficult job look easy.

"Hey," I said to Murray, "come over here for a while and watch how I do it." She did. I explained what I was doing and got her to repeat it. She dropped her wrench again. It was a long day.

Towards the end of the shift, Murray had mastered catching a dropped wrench. She'd done it often enough for her reflexes to adjust to micro-gravity. She was still struggling to do fine work with her gloves on: I made a mental note to give her a nut and bolt when we went in so she could practice overnight. She was getting better at applying torque, and she was really working at it.

"Nearly," I said, tightening off one of her connections.

"I'm gonna get this right, Peggy. Here, try that."

"Nearly, again."

"That?"

"Another nearly."

I thought she'd lose patience, but she kept at it. As we moved onto our last step of the day she'd all but got the knack. Her last-but-one joint was almost good enough to let through. The rest of us had finished work. Diego and the Gaffer were watching. There was certainly enough torque for it to hold. I paused...considered letting her have it...

"I'll check it myself if you don't hurry up," said Diego.

I had to call it.

"Almost, but not quite," I said. Murray was already putting on the last nut, handling her podger neatly.

"Here," said the Gaffer, "let me check that one." It took a while for him to pull over. "Hey, nice work, girlie."

"Yeah?" said Murray. She hung nearby, a little too close.

"This is good for your first day out."

"Good enough?"

The Gaffer gave the nut one last adjustment.

"Nearly. You'll get the hang of it tomorrow. Should I take that hundred out of your first week's pay?"

**Murray turned up** early for the next workshift, carrying her gloves and practice bolt. Construction Manager Angela Caldwell was talking to the Gaffer while I checked the lines. Caldwell had



her long grey hair tied back and wore a singlet that showed the scars on her arms.

I greeted Murray as she came in. "Keen to get outside again, are you?" I asked. I was pleased. Enthusiasm was natural in a kid her age.

"Nah, not specially. Wanted to talk to the Gaffer about today's build."

The Gaffer heard and turned, one eyebrow raised, breaking off his conversation with Caldwell. Although he and I went through the build guide every day, we didn't expect input from the rest of the team. Not that it was banned; it just wasn't traditional.

"Angela, this is our latest apprentice, Grace Murray," he said. "Murray, Construction Manager Caldwell. What did you want to talk about?"

Angela Caldwell gave Murray a level, assessing look. They were about the same height. Murray didn't speak. I hadn't seen her intimidated before. Diego arrived during the silence, realised something was going on, and kept his mouth shut. The Gaffer prompted Murray.

"Come on girly, speak up. You've got something to say about the build order?"

Murray could speak nicely when she wanted to; she'd learnt to smooth out her accent.

"It'd work better if we did steps eighteen and nineteen first, then went back to step one," she said. "We'd get the biggest section bolted into place early, meaning we could separate into two teams after that. We could get five steps ahead of the day's programme." She looked away. "Plus we'd be able to use two lines for the full shift."

Diego rolled his eyes.

"Is that what this is about?" asked the Gaffer. "You're going to have to get used to working with one line. It's perfectly safe."

"It wasn't safe for Batukhtina."

They'd shown the same training video back when I apprenticed. Batukhtina was an early casualty; she'd been doing a solo repair on ISS-2 when her line snapped.

The video is silent. For the first few minutes Batukhtina's visor reflects the space station. Look closely and there's a face at the viewport: her colleague...watching...helpless. Then, Batukhtina stops reaching towards him, turns away, and relaxes, facing the Earth, arms and legs spread-eagled.

She had floated gently away with sixty-nine minutes of oxygen and no way of getting back. It gives all of us the shivers. Just thinking about it reminded me how much I wanted to go home. If I found someone I could trust to take over my work I'd be on the next shuttle back to Earth. Sure, I'd miss the view, but I could live with that.

"We have stronger lines now," I said, "checked and replaced regularly. Two lines is fine for tourists, but it slows us down."

"My way'd be quicker though, even with secondary lines."

Caldwell took over. She didn't appreciate the implication her site was dangerous.

"Interesting idea, Murray, but you're thinking like an Earthworm. There's not enough manoeuvrability in your spacesuits to be able to work with the main steelwork in the way. Plus, I designed this order to keep you near the others. Your inexperience is much more dangerous than working without a secondary line. You'll do everything as a full team until I say otherwise." Caldwell turned to the Gaffer. "That clear, Rasmus?"

"Perfectly, Construction Manager."

"Way to go, nearly-nineteen," said Diego once the door hissed closed behind Caldwell.

**Two weeks on**, we finally split the team. The Gaffer and Diego went off to fit struts at the hotel end of the truss, while Murray and I checked and tightened nuts along its bottom chord. It was real monkey work.

I took a brief break to admire the Earth. Vivid patches of blue showed through heavy cloud cover. Murray didn't stop. She was working steadily, using her podger like a pro, movements well adapted to the lack of gravity. Even Diego no longer doubted she'd done construction work before. I was beginning to think she was made of the right stuff.

"Must have been hard for you, getting made redundant," I said, on a suit-to-suit channel for privacy.

"Yeah," she said, not breaking her rhythm. "Mum'd lost her job too. Granddad looked after us, but he died last year..." She faded out. I turned to look at her, giving her the chance to continue if she wanted. She didn't.

"Something's bugging me," she said, full-volume again. "These are Boltefast nuts and bolts. The construction models spec SureEng."

"SureEng OEA. That's Or Equal and Approved. These are approved."

"Who picked Boltefast? Would it be the Gaffer?"

I didn't hesitate. I'd faced tougher questioners than this kid. Plus, I was interested to see if she'd follow up.

"Probably. He's answerable for costs once a project's on site. Or it could have been Head Office."

"And who approved it?"

"Angela Caldwell, most likely."

She nodded and dropped the subject, only to come back to it the next day.

"I still don't get the equal and approved thing," she said. I was pleased she was bright enough to keep asking the right questions, although I was glad we were talking suit-to-suit again. I hoped I was the only one whose ear she was bending.

"Those brands," she said. "I looked them up. The Boltefast are lower grade. They're not equal to SureEng. Their shear strength is lower."

"Lower but high enough."

"Who says?"

"If Caldwell approved them, Caldwell says."

"It's your initials on the change request."

"Then I made the suggestion and Caldwell approved it. It's pretty routine."

She stayed quiet for a moment, pulling out a bolt and looking at it. She was getting pretty good at fine manipulation wearing gloves.

"They're cheaper," she said. "Who makes the saving?"

*She's nearly there*, I thought, willing her to work it out. I didn't answer. When she spoke again, she seemed to have changed the subject.

"There was this guy I worked with before," she said. "His wages went further than everyone else's. He had the latest tech, ate out a lot, nice clothes. I liked him. Always got the first round in at the pub."

"Uh-huh?" I said.

"His sister-in-law, see, she ran a galvanising firm. Hot dip and powder coating. We used her on almost all our contracts. Must have been good."

I knew then she was the one – my ideal successor. She confirmed it with her next question:

"Do you think Boltefast is good in the same way?"

"Yes," I said, looking straight at her, "I'd say it's good in exactly that way."

She nodded. Time to put my exit strategy into action.

"I'm thinking of requesting retirement," I said. "I'm too old to be wielding a podger. But, I need someone up here to take over the paperwork."

"Doesn't the Gaffer deal with it?"

"He's never been interested. I'd prefer to pass it on to someone else. Someone who'd keep me in the loop, as it were."

"That person would be taking a risk, wouldn't they? Perhaps half the risk?"

"I wouldn't say half. Eighty:twenty, perhaps?"

"Sixty:forty," she countered.

"It takes time to build up contacts," I pointed out. "Eighty:twenty for the first three years, seventy:thirty when you finish your apprenticeship."

"Hey!" called the Gaffer, on the open channel. I looked up and he was coming our way. "You two are getting behind. Problems, Peggy?"

"No, nothing," I said.

"Girlie?"

"Nah."

"Get a move on, then."

We finished the shift in silence. I was happy to let her mull it over.

"**Is it true** Caldwell got those scars working on the London Olympic stadium?" asked Murray.

We'd just come in from a shift, a couple of days after I made my offer to the kid. I was waiting for her reply, confident it'd be yes. Who doesn't want to earn a little extra on the side?

Construction was a day ahead of schedule, the Gaffer was whistling happily, and Diego had gone easy on Murray for a few hours.

"That's the rumour," I said. "Must be forty years ago. How'd you hear? She doesn't talk about it."

"One of the tourists." The Gaffer stopped whistling and turned to look. We weren't supposed to fraternise.

Murray continued. "Old guy. Used to be a labourer."



"What were you doing in the hotel?" asked the Gaffer.

"He came over here," said Murray. "Wanted to see how we did things."

"More to the point, what's a labourer doing in the hotel?" asked Diego. "Won the lottery?"

The Gaffer and I laughed. Murray shook her head.

"Nah, he's been saving all his life. Always dreamed of going into space, he said."

"What'd he know about Angela Caldwell?" I asked.

"He worked on the stadium too. He was off sick when one end of the lower tier collapsed. She was apprenticing with the steelwork gang. Eight people were killed. They pulled Caldwell out of the rubble two days later."

Diego whistled. "No wonder she likes space."

Diego and the Gaffer had finished changing. Murray was going slowly; I guessed she wanted to talk.

"I need a volunteer to check the oxygen tanks," I said.

"That'll be you, nearly-nineteen," said Diego, suddenly out the door, the Gaffer right behind him. I sat down and waited to hear what was on Murray's mind.

"He was nice, that old guy," she said. "I hadn't thought about the tourists. What if there's an accident?"

"There won't be."

"But what if something fails?"

"It won't. Everything's checked. I wouldn't let anything past if I wasn't completely confident." I was lying, but not much. There's always the possibility of component failure. My specification changes only increased the chances a little.

"He's probably someone's granddad."

"He's perfectly safe," I snapped. "Talking to tourists is likely to get you in trouble. So is gossiping about Caldwell."

She looked guilty at that. I took pity on her.

"You can head off," I said. "I'll do the tanks."

I should have known better than to be soft on an apprentice. She knew I'd be occupied for at least half an hour. She used the time to grass me up to Caldwell.

Of course, Caldwell came straight to me afterwards.

"Whistleblowing!" I said, disappointed. I hardly believed it; Murray had seemed so promising.

"How much does she know?" asked Caldwell. I shrugged.

"She obviously hasn't worked out your role."

"Let's keep it that way. Arrange a safety infraction tomorrow and I'll fire her on the spot. Once she's been shipped home in disgrace no-one will believe her."

Easy for Caldwell to say; she wasn't at risk of exposure. I was sure I could come up with a better solution.

"Here, clip in, Murray," I said, holding out a prepared line.

Diego sailed through the door. "I'll take that one. Nearly-nineteen's not ready yet."

He was right; Murray hadn't fully sealed her suit.

"You're not suited up," I said, pulling my hand back, "and she'll only be a moment."

"So get another line ready quickly," said Diego, taking the line and clipping his suit in before I could think of a reason to stop him. He was finished and waiting to go well before Murray.

"Taking your time, nearly-nineteen?" he taunted.

"Get lost."

"Enough!" said the Gaffer. "You two are working together today. I need Peggy with me on the central connector point. Diego, no messing around, understand? Peggy, I want a second line for girlie here."

The Gaffer's order was a relief. I'd drawn a blank trying to come up with a reason for Diego and Murray to swap lines. I broke out two extra lines and checked them.

"No need for me," said Diego.

"Safety handbook applies to you too," I said, throwing one his way.

"First I've heard of it," he said.

"Just clip in."

"Nah, remember what Caldwell said? I'm in no danger so long as nearly-nineteen's fully restrained."

Murray ignored him and clipped in, doubly safe, to my frustration.

"Leave it," said the Gaffer, punching the air-

lock code. Diego laughed, and lobbed his secondary back to me. I considered calling him back. I could say I'd spotted something wrong with his line. I nearly did it...but I needed to act before Murray was sent Earthside.

I decided. A warning would do the job. It was a shame; I'd always liked Diego. But, Murray needed to be taught a lesson about telling tales.

I watched them as best I could from the opposite end of the truss, but I was still looking the other way when the trouble came. The first I knew was Murray shouting for help over the open channel. The Gaffer looked round, swore once, and headed towards them.

Diego was without a line, moving steadily away from the station. As I watched, Murray flung herself after him. She got her trajectory wrong, would have missed him by a mile even if her line had been long enough.

"Murray," I said. "There's nothing you can do. Come away now."

She didn't reply. She'd pulled herself back in and was fiddling with her line. She launched towards Diego again, this time with her secondary line attached to the end of her primary to give herself more length. She'd got the reach, but her angle was still wrong. She tried to correct mid-jump. It didn't work.

She pulled in, sighted more carefully, and pushed off. It was an elegant dive, with the heading exactly right. Diego held out his arms. She got to within two meters, the line snapped tight, and she stopped.

"Nearly," said Diego, softly.

She held position, looking at him as he drifted off. She said nothing. He relaxed his arms, but didn't turn away. I could see Murray reflected in his visor.

It seemed a long while before the Gaffer's voice interrupted.

"Grace, you did good, but pull in now. We're going to try and grab him using R-3. I need you out of the way. Diego?"

"You really think an arm pick-up might work, Gaffer?"

"I've gone through it with the operator on duty and she's confident. Fifty pounds says it'll work."

Murray was shaken and wary as I helped her back inside. I watched the footage of the rescue

later – as did most of the Earth's population. It looked like a slow-motion ballet. Murray's dive turned her into a hero.

**Angela Caldwell** avoided me that evening and the next day. I engineered an encounter outside her bunkroom, but all she said was "I'm not going to be sent Earthside over this, Peggy," and pushed past. A highly visible accident wasn't what she'd had in mind, especially as we couldn't pin it on Murray. Murray the hero.

We were kept in for a shift while Caldwell inspected every piece of kit we used, as per post-incident guidelines. The following morning everything was back to normal – a new sort of normal.

"Psych has given you a sick note for the week," said the Gaffer to Diego. "Why not use it?" They were both suiting up.

"And let you lot mess up the build? No chance."

"Think you're irreplaceable do you, Diego?" said Murray.

"Too right," said Diego. "You're barely competent with that podger, Grace."

Murray grinned. "At least I don't wander off half-way through a shift."

They both laughed.

The Gaffer put his visor down. "Let's go, then. Diego, you're with me to finish the central connector. Peggy and Grace, you're together. Secondary lines for everyone."

There were no complaints.

"Diego and I are doing another interview tonight," said Murray as we worked.

"You're quite the media stars."

"Yeah, everyone loves a heroic failure, especially when there's a happy ending." She was quiet for a while. Then: "They love an honest whistleblower too."

She hand-tightened a nut, as comfortable with delicate movements in her gloves as she would be bare-handed. I thought hard. I'd missed my chance to get rid of her; negotiation was my best option. If she talked I'd be in serious trouble.

"The media might like whistleblowers, but bosses don't," I said. "You've made a good start here. Why spoil it?" She stopped working. I pushed on. "What about Diego? If you go public tonight, he'll be associated with you. It'll end his



career too." I paused to let it sink in. "How about we increase your cut to thirty percent from the start and say no more about it?"

"You tried to kill me!"

"Thirty-five."

"I want you out of here."

"That's the plan. Thirty-five, and I move groundside as soon as I can."

"No."

I turned away and tightened a couple of nuts, giving time for her confidence to falter. "I won't go any higher than thirty-five," I said, my back to her.

"No," she repeated. "You meant that line for me and the others saw it. What will Caldwell do when I tell her it wasn't an accident?"

It was a good question. Caldwell had plenty to hide, but this was outside her comfort zone. I didn't know what she'd do. Still...

"You're missing something," I said.

That shut her up. I wish I could have seen her face as the penny dropped.

"Caldwell's in on it," she said, a statement rather than a question.

She moved away from me, turning to look at the point where her lines clipped onto the rail. I was close enough to reach out and unhook them. I hoped she was scared. If I was lucky she'd quit before the end of the day and my problems would be solved.

I wasn't lucky.

**I retreated** to my bunk to watch Murray and Diego's interview. I couldn't bear to be in the common area while they were broadcasting.

It was sick-making stuff: Diego joking about how he'd misjudged Murray at first and Murray all forgiveness.

I wished I dared switch off.

It seemed every Earthworm with a connection had a question to ask, and Murray wanted to talk to them all. She even got in a tribute to her dead granddad, who taught her right from wrong.

The longer it went on, the more tense I got. I held my breath each time Murray spoke. She chatted and laughed.

Finally, the flow of questions stopped. The pair said their goodbyes and signed off to the world. I breathed a premature sigh of relief.

The broadcast continued on the staff network. Diego moved away from the camera. Angela Caldwell came into shot.

"We have a special announcement," Caldwell said. I didn't like the complicit look that passed between her and Murray. "Grace, would you?"

Murray smiled.

"We all know how much Peggy Varus deserves to be rewarded for her work." I swear the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end when I heard my name. "I'm delighted to announce she's been promoted to a management role at Head Office. Congratulations, Peggy!"

My orders came through seconds later. I'd been allocated a groundside desk job without any opportunities for creativity. Congratulations were hardly appropriate, although everyone chimed in with good wishes over the open channel.

A second message pinged in almost immediately. Caldwell would be taking on my construction duties until a replacement arrived, with all paperwork being handled groundside in the meantime.

My head was spinning. Caldwell hadn't used a podger in a decade. And, how did she and Murray plan to keep their scam – *my* scam – secret with Head Office nosing into everything?

**I turned up** for the start of the next shift as usual and offered my services to the Gaffer. I needed to find out what the situation was.

I still hoped Murray and Caldwell would buy my silence with a cut. I'd salted away some money, but not enough for comfort. I needed that ongoing income, or I'd never retire.

"I've rejigged the programme from today onwards," announced Caldwell. It was news to me. I looked at the Gaffer. He knew about it.

"What's going on?" I asked, as casually as I could. Diego and Murray had yet to arrive.

"We've got a delivery the day after tomorrow," said the Gaffer.

"Nothing's scheduled," I said.

"SureEng nuts and bolts," said Caldwell. My jaw dropped. "I ran some spot checks and I'm not comfortable with the shear strength of the Boltefast ones. We're going to replace the lot."

I closed my mouth and took a deep breath.

"I don't see how... We'll never finish on time."

Caldwell pulled up the full build guide.

"We've changed a few other material specifications," she said. I looked at the changes in despair. Caldwell had been talked into dismantling our entire scheme. Murray's negotiation skills were better than I'd realised.

Caldwell continued: "It turns out the new suppliers can deliver sooner, which gives us a bit of leeway."

"We need more than a bit!" I said, looking at the Gaffer for support. "Especially when we're already behind because of the accident."

The Gaffer looked pained at mention of the accident. He glanced at Caldwell. *He knows*, I realised.

Murray and Diego swung in.

"Ah," said the Gaffer, pleased with the distraction, "right on time. How did you get on?"

"What have you been doing?" I asked.

"Fraternising," said Diego. I frowned. Nothing was making sense.

"The hotel operator has agreed we can have R-3 for two hours every morning," said Murray. I looked at the revised build guide again. The extra arm would get them back on schedule within weeks. Everything I'd achieved had been reversed; no-one but the shareholders would make money out of this job.

"Thanks for coming down, Peggy," said the Gaffer, "but we've got things under control. Take a couple of days off."

"I asked a favour while I was talking to the hotel manager," said Murray. "She's given you permission to spend as long as you like in the skylounge. Enjoy the view."

**I was shipped** groundside on the shuttle that made the SureEng delivery, fittingly enough. It didn't have passenger facilities, so I suited up for the journey. The gang waved me off.

Angela Caldwell looked more relaxed than she had in years. She confided she was enjoying working with a podger and having a holiday from management. I might have known she'd be the type to go straight.

The Gaffer wouldn't look me in the eye. Eleven years we'd worked together and he barely said goodbye.

Diego shook my hand.

Murray hung back until the others had left. I could still see myself in her; she'd got exactly what she wanted: acceptance, a place on the gang, and an honest living. Her dear old granddad would have been proud. Would she regret giving up the money, I wondered, when she reached my age?

"Better start saving for your retirement now," I said. "Or you'll be working until you drop."

She recoiled. "That's better than being like you," she said.

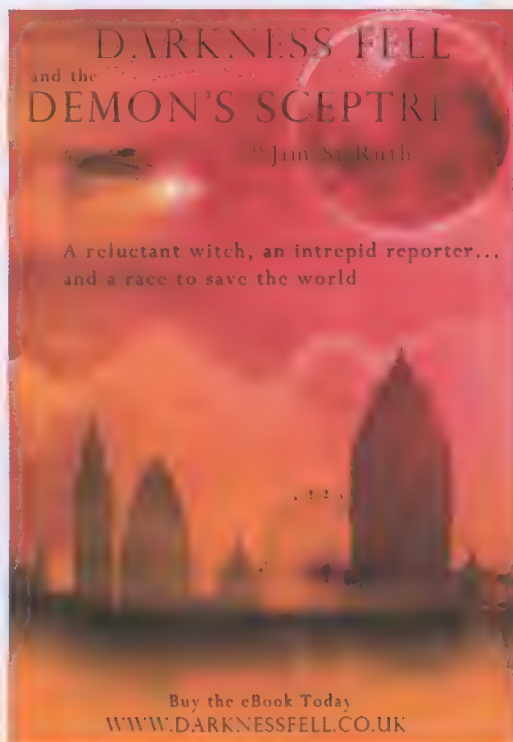
"Oh, but you could have been, if you'd had the courage. You nearly made it."

I put down my visor. I hoped Murray would see herself, reflected in gold, as I turned away. But, deep down, I knew she saw a tired old woman whose schemes had failed; I was a build guide Murray would never follow.

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**Helen Jackson likes making stuff up and eating cake. She's lucky enough to live in Edinburgh, her favourite city. Her stories have been published in the anthologies *Rocket Science* and *ImaginNation: Stories of Scotland's Future*, and in *Daily Science Fiction*. Visit [helen-jackson.com](http://helen-jackson.com) for more information.**

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## READERS' POLL

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year.

You may vote for and against any number of stories published in issues #238 to #243 inclusive (we publish a list of eligible works here to help remind you). You don't have to have read every issue in order to cast a vote.

As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think. We'll publish as many comments as we can.

Martin McGrath will be overseeing the poll. Please send him your votes using one of the methods below.

*To vote by post:*  
Martin McGrath  
48 Spooners Drive  
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St. Albans AL2 2HL  
UK

*To vote by email:*  
interzonepoll@ttapress.com

*To vote online:*  
ttapress.com/interzone/  
readerspoll/

The results will be published in issue #246, so please make sure your votes are in before March 31st.

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## THE GENOA PASSAGE GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

I told myself that they would have to be fakes. At worst, it would be a good hike; furthermore, I would not be faked.

"I will take you to the places," he said, "and you will pay me later, or not at all."

He gave me a rifle and said that two other people would come with us.





Earlier, he had recited a pretty good tour guide spiel, how from 1945 to 1950 a route through the mountains from Germany down to the port of Genoa here in Italy had been used by Nazi war criminals, with papers forged for them by anti-Bolshevik Fascist Catholic Italian priests who feared the Soviet Union's post-war takeover of Eastern Europe and in time the rest of the world, and imagined that the surviving Reichmasters would escape and form a necessary resurgent German power against Stalin – or there would be no one to stand against him, given the left's blindness to the betrayal of their socialist ideals, which had never been any good anyway because they denied free market capitalism's morality play of winners and losers, of rewards and punishments here and now and not in the life beyond.

This much was true, and I understood it very well, but the guide told it with a touch of irony and disdain that piqued my curiosity while making it difficult to judge what he thought about it. The escapees' enablers, Roman Catholic Franciscan priests, were fact in the public record, never contradicted or much discussed, for various reasons, by the Allied nations that had won the war against Hitler. Very old news.

"So you'll just show me their route?" I asked.

"No, no," he said, "much more than that," his face stuck between a smile and a scowl.

"More than what?" I asked, puzzled.

"They're still there," he said softly, rubbing his dark eyebrows, "along the passage."

"What do you mean?" I asked, amused.

"The pass," he said, "splits things up. Not reliably, but often enough to be of interest...to some people."

"You mean to me?" I asked. "Why?"

"They killed your family, did they not?" he asked, suddenly gazing at me with undeniable conviction. "As you told me – no?"

We had talked at breakfast in the resort hotel, where I had stopped for some lazy time in my walking tour, and he had taken me for a likely mark.

"Well, yes, but long ago, as I told you, in the '30s and '40s of the last century. My grandparents, actually." I had no idea why I had told him anything; too much free time sometimes made

me babble.

"Yes, but the...killers are still there, in the pass," he said, open faced, like a child.

"Still there?" I asked. "This is 2016. Who are you talking about?"

"As many of them that went through that way are still there. Eichmann and Bormann, and many others, to be met as often as we want to go hunting."

"Hunting?" I asked, annoyed by his provocation; he knew how to do it.

He said, "But if you like, you can only watch them be killed."

"Watch, killed?" I asked. He was insane.

"The others will shoot if you do not wish to do so."

"Others?" Even worse.

"The living who still want it."

"Want what?" I asked.

"To hunt those who fled. Thousands escaped. Only thirty thousand of some one hundred fifty thousand war criminals were ever caught or tried. Too much trouble to catch and try."

"Yes," I said, aware of that much, "it was a thankless task." Satisfying to catch, I told myself, only in the most private of circumstances of delusional revenge. No one knew how many of these personal executions took place, or how many were mistakes, but I didn't want to discuss it with him. I'd had enough of it with my survivor parents when they were alive, who had never been able to forget the tragedies of their lost parents, the grandparents I had never had a chance to know; worse when I found out that my biological parents and two brothers had been killed, and that the parents I knew had adopted me without papers and had decided never to tell me.

But it got out, through an uncle who was not an uncle and who told me before he died; dust in his lungs from working in a metalworking mill stopped his heart one day; only a month earlier he had told me in a drunken stupor. Both my adoptive parents were dead by then, and he increased their number by telling me about my lost originals.

I went on a walking tour of a warming Europe in 2016, living on money market earnings which ran up to twenty percent in that decade. Maybe I thought I could walk off the past's irritants, drain



them from my brain through my feet. I saw the metal dust in my uncle's lungs, slowly working its way to kill him as he lamented the loss of his wife and son in the Hitlerian war, and the uselessness of his unverifiable economics doctorate in America.

A shadow had fallen across my insides with that strange uncle's death, and I had no idea of how to rid myself of its pall, except that I knew that it would lure me back to the locale of my birth, from which I had been exported to New York City, naturalized into citizenship so I could claim my college scholarship, Americanized into ideals that were already bleeding to death by the time the constitution had been adopted in 1789. Slavery and the Indian genocide built a country still in denial, chained to its past, still ill with immigrant enemies, as stained with human blood as anywhere else on earth.

It was my shadowy inner landscape that had attracted the tour guide, a curious, thoughtful man, I told myself, who read my melancholy expression and body language, and knew a sucker when he saw one.

His story was a lie on the face of it, but matched to my mood and personal history by an observant con man. What could I lose by going along for the show, which I would not even have to pay for up front, if ever?

It was a smooth ride north, in an expensive air-conditioned and well-shocked black Rolls-Royce. I sat in the stressed suspension with a quiet old man and woman. The guide was up front with the driver. Business must have been good for the guide to have a vintage vehicle.

We did not speak, as if on our way to a funeral or an execution, which in a sense was true. My companions in the facing seats were well past their sixties, maybe much older, but fit and boot-ed for hiking out of a past that was not yet past. Their gray, well preserved faces held more than could ever be said. Their staring silence knew my youth.

Outside the windows the beautiful landscape was ever more hilly as we neared the mountains. Gnarly trees, mossy rocks, goat trails, and streams, a stone house here and there all clung to a steepening that might roll up and over the blue sky, past the zenith and down the other side, as

if the world was the inner surface of a hollow sphere.

An amnesiac concentration locked me into a scanning, predatory patience, as if waiting to be confirmed in lost truths.

The guide had told me of his long walks in this landscape, where he had stumbled upon the storied infinity of branching pasts, and I had told myself that only a lunatic would believe in the discovery that had given him the way in which he now earned his living.

Still, however vengeful the suckers, he would have to deliver something to get paid. But what could he ever deliver? Once he was paid, I imagined that he might kill us in some seclusion of mossy rocks, but reminded myself that he had not asked to be paid in advance or out here.

We reached what seemed an arbitrary destination and got out. The driver stayed with the car. The guide led the way.

The old man and woman walked ahead of me on the narrow hot dusty trail, with high-powered rifles over their shoulders. I had refused the weapon offered to me, but I felt it pulling at me from inside the car.

Our guide stopped and pointed, then came back to my side.

I peered ahead, but could not see the figures coming toward us. The couple unshouldered their rifles. The guide handed me his binoculars.

I put them to my eyes and fixed on the figure of a man. He shimmered as if through a mass of heated air, and for several moments held still between one instant and the next, in the way that an analog clock's second hand seems to hesitate when you stare at it too long, as if it will never find the next moment.

A guide moved ahead of a man I recognized from the album of mugshots which my guide kept for his customers. All the faces had a look about them that was unmistakable to an informed viewer.

"It's him!" the old woman rasped, wheezing in the hot morning air, and for an instant I felt that she would die of heaving.

Then silently, they both raised their rifles and fired, and the figure's head exploded into a watermelon red as the shots echoed and he fell backwards.

His guide turned to look back and stood transfixed, then fled back up the trail, and seemed to fade away.

The old couple sighed and stared, and trembled as if about to collapse, but held steady.

My guide's face was without expression as he led us back, and I could not help feeling deprived; there had been no one here for me to kill today.

Back at the hotel, I tried to absorb the fact that I had watched Adolph Eichmann die, so many decades after his well documented execution in Israel.

At dinner with the guide I asked, "So how do you do it?"

He rubbed his unshaven face, sipped some wine, and said, "Not to be missed, eh?"

"Is it some kind of...therapy?" I asked foolishly. You could do as much with a story, play, or movie, but not in reality...

He acted as if he knew me better than I knew myself; but I could only imagine actors and marks. The guide's business was built on vivid staging. I told myself, nothing more.

"How often do you do this?" I asked.

"As often as anyone wishes," he said. "You'll see tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"Better you'll see for yourself."

"Will I have to pay to go again?"

"If you wish," he said, "or not." He seemed to have forgotten that I had not yet paid him anything.

We went again early next morning. The cooler air was transparent. The old couple was once again with us.

My own stirrings began to struggle, and I wondered whether there would somehow be someone for me today. The guide did not know, but sooner or later there would be, he had told me, even though I knew no names beyond the famous.

"I saw no one in the mugshots," I had told him.

"Not to worry, they were all guilty."

He gave me his binoculars and I saw Eichmann fall for a second time, bloodying the brown dust of the trail; this time the old couple shot the fleeing guide.

On the hike back the guide said softly, "Well,

you see. The variants may be endless, but these old ones feel it may be a set number."

"How often have they shot this one?" I asked.

"Six times, but they hope to get them all."

"They might always be there," he explained to me at the hotel, "to die in one variant and wait for death in endless others."

They did die, it seemed, and I felt that by the logic of the assumptions we would not confront that individual again, only new variants, however many; a large number, or an infinity, bestowing the happiness of endless revenge on the deserving.

A useless task, except for a punctuated satisfaction, sufficient unto the moment, which I could not quite accept when I learned this much. Today, in 2016, I told myself, most of the hundred thousand or more who had never been caught were either dead or near death, as were the thirty thousand...

In my time, my history...

But not elsewhere, where they could still die, continuing to suffer without oblivion; except that they suffered only momentarily. Did they feel anything, somehow joined to all their dying others in their degrees of guilt, if they felt any, perhaps as a passing uneasiness of premonitions as they hiked through the pass to their exile, dying in some and escaping in others...

I thought of the hundred thousand or more who had escaped to live out their lives when I saw the old couple in the lobby the next morning, sitting with hands folded, with their lost ones alive in their brains, waiting to be avenged again...

Our guide was in the bar. I slid in next to him in the booth and asked, "Tell me, are the bullets fired into the past?"

"They would have to be," he said, sipping his coffee out of a chipped porcelain cup decorated with a mountain scene. There was a chip in the matching saucer. "Into one kind of past," he added.

"Can we walk into it, the past, I mean?"

"Never really went that far," he said.

"But if you let them walk on toward you," I said, "wouldn't they walk into the present?"

"It never comes to that," he said, "since shots are fired before it can happen."



He sipped some more, touching the chipped part of the saucer.

"You know," I said, "that you'll run out of clients."

"Nearly so now," he said.

"How long have you been at this?"

"A long time."

"And you know how it has to end?"

"Unless I find younger clients. Grandchildren. I've been researching some."

"You checked on me?"

"No – you just walked in with...that look on your face."

"But I don't want to kill anyone," I said.

"Keep looking," he said, "so you don't miss your chance. All this may disappear one day."

"And you'll be out of work," I said.

He asked, "You do not wish to avenge yourself?"

"I don't think so."

"Even with that shadow on your face?"

"You have an interest in seeing it."

He gave me a hurt look. "Do you not imagine it, do you not feel what you should do?"

"I'm too far from feeling the crimes," I said, startled by the denial in my words.

"But the dark...it comes for you," he said.

I asked, "What is it for you, only money?"

He hesitated, then said, "I saw how some of them wanted it, and it moved me when they came looking for leads about the escapees and those who helped them, even as late as twenty years ago. They'd pay anything, once they heard what I knew."

He had told them what they wanted to hear and somehow staged the illusion, I insisted to myself as if waking from a nightmare.

"But how did you? It's some kind of trick."

"No, no, I found the places. I walked out there one day and passed some people, but when I stopped to look after them they were gone. Then I read an article about the Nazi escape routes and recognized faces. I can't explain it all, except maybe by the way light splits...as in the stories I read about quantum experiments."

"That's it? Nothing more...personal?"

He looked away from me and finished his coffee, then put the cup down carefully on the saucer. It was either something personal with him

or just business; he didn't want to let on either way. "You're still an observer today?" he asked.

"You want to start charging me?"

He smiled. "Sooner or later." He seemed to know what I would think and what I would do.

There was no one in the pass that day. The old couple sat down on a rock wall and waited, faces impassive as if expecting the last judgment to sound. I looked at my guide and tried to think why I was still here, seesawing when I should have fled from what had to be, at every other moment, some kind of charade. How many people had he hypnotized and brought here? How many had simply lost interest? How often can you kill an enemy? A time would have to come when no one would know enough history to care.

The old couple did not look at me, but it was as if they could hear my thoughts, and were content with my presence. Their eyes had not met mine, not even once. How often had the couple come out here?

I stayed at the hotel and struggled to understand what I had seen – or what had been given for me to see. My guide went out with new clients, and left me to myself. I imagined that it was part of his plan, to set the hook as deeply as possible.

I tried to think, if I could call it thinking. My guide lived in the town as a bachelor, spending his earnings on the local women. He was who he seemed to be, a man with a job. But who was he?

I began to think it a mercy that the escapees from the defeat of Nazi Germany might be dying along their escape routes, repeatedly, endlessly, at the hands of witnessing victims, now so much older than their tormentors.

From the mugshots, I still did not recognize any of the fled thousands; any face in the rifle's sights would do as well; they all had the same resigned look.

Did anything spill over from one variation to another, as a fear and expectation of death? What could it matter if the fugitives had no idea of what was happening to them?

Sudden death seemed too much mercy.

A bullet in the head was not enough; but even dismemberment by a black hole would not be enough.

For Eichmann, better than the simple rope that was still waiting for him in Jerusalem – in his future, my past.

True, they escaped through the strangeness of the passage – but what made them visible to us? Did we somehow stir the quanta and pull ghosts out of ourselves?

Who was this guide? Who was I? A figment of someone's deranged imagination?

A pile-up of the past had made me, and it was still there, crusted over, controlled by my denials.

One evening I thought of exposing the delusions within myself, by commanding myself to awaken.

I gave the order near sleep, with no result, but no result was itself a result.

I lay there, abandoned and contentedly godless, but suddenly grateful that the quantum realm beneath reality might offer provision for a true hell, in which the worst of us had found eternal punishment, by being killed, eaten, and digested without end by the eternal mill of existence, shaped into shapeless monstrosities...

But they did not know it. How could they? Did their killers know joy? Were they repeating their actions with the hope of killing all the criminals? How could they know when it was over? When the pass ran out of fugitives?

How could there be a conclusion?

One way to escape the pool of madness in which I was drowning, I told myself, was to expose the fakery, shadow my guide and discover the trick; it had to be a projection of some kind, with confederates falling down in the rifle sights.

Walk into Eichmann and his guide and dissolve them.

I followed my guide around for a few days, but found no evidence against what he claimed. He worked, partied, and womanized.

Finally, I decided to walk right into one of his masquerades – so I went out without him.

"Are you a Jew?" Eichmann asked me in the hot morning.

"It doesn't matter," I said, and stepped toward him on the path. "You killed many others."

"Any of your family?" he asked, smiling. "If they hang me a million times, it wouldn't satisfy...your kind."

"They will hang you, you know," I said.

"Possibly. I sometimes dream about it."

I took a step closer, thinking that I had to be talking to myself, because he was saying exactly what was expected of him.

"They'll catch you," I said. "I know...that they did."

In his future, long in my past, the Israeli team was at work, with a submarine waiting off the coast of Argentina; the trial and the 1962 hanging in Jerusalem repeated itself, in one variant, and in an infinity of others; he could die in Jerusalem, or here, as often as anyone who wished to kill him would want.

But doing the same thing over and over, I told myself, as if expecting a different result, was a good description of illness. Yet here, I knew, no one expected a different result, only repeated death, with always too little suffering...

To kill your enemy was a mercy only to the living.

I looked back along the way I had come, but he was gone.

I met my guide's car on the way back. The old couple was with him, rifle on the old man's back. They went past without speaking to me. The guide seemed to know that I would not want a ride back.

I walked on, thinking that the ground itself had been shamed by the first escapees, and had marked itself across the probabilities for all who would come, and see, and kill.

They fell yet they lived, as if promised by some satanic redeemer never to die.

At breakfast my guide said, "You have still not pulled a trigger on one of these...things."

"I don't know which one killed...my people. I was adopted by other survivors."

"Does it matter?"

"Killing is killing," I said, finishing my grapefruit.

"So you live by tautologies? These criminals are all still there, as many as we can find, forever making their passage to the sea and to South America, Canada, Mexico, and the United States, fleeing all human conscience."

"I wish it was a finite number."

He smiled. "If so there will come a day when they will all be dead."



"A hundred thousand or more makes a lot of killing."

"Nothing compared to theirs. Shoot any face you see. No difference."

"What good would it do me?"

"Try it."

He seemed calm and convinced in his advice.

"And your fee from me?"

"No fee until you are satisfied."

I could just go away.

"Who are you, really?" I asked, feeling resentful. "This may all be nonsense in a way I don't understand."

"I may tell you," he said, "who I am."

"But you won't, of course. You learned all this by chance," I said, "or you invented the whole show somehow, and found...customers. How you do it makes no sense."

"I don't understand it myself," he said, "not being a physicist. But what happens is real, so it must make sense even if you and I never know how."

I looked into his face and could not speak. Physicists spoke similarly about the utility of quantum theory. It works, predicts, don't ask how, get over it.

I left that day, no charge.

He had told me that he had inherited the business from his father.

Some nights I dream that I am looking through field glasses, which suddenly become a rifle sight's cross-hairs, and I see a mustached face, without which so many of us would not have been born. A traumatically shocked corporal from World War I had fathered a generation with his hatred...

I have revisited the passage in later years, long after the guide had apparently died; no one at the hotel remembered how, or even if he was dead. I walked the trail and thought of taking up his job, but the resonances of the effect were gone from that dusty trail.

Not enough customers in our variant.

But the monsters are still marching down from the mountains, beyond our sight, spied by my guide and his clients, forever dying in that knotted infinity, where I feel myself pulling the trigger.

We can kill them all, I told myself, in their various pasts, to at least deny them the lives they

still seek to live out in our history and elsewhere; in a sense it's all our history...

One hundred fifty thousand dead Nazis suddenly seemed too small compared to millions of native Americans, African slaves, Armenians, Jews and Palestinians, Poles, Gypsies, Rwandans, Iraqis, Afghans, Syrians. One hundred million dead in the twentieth century's wars and genocides. More wealth spent on killing and preparations for killing than on any other activity. Not to mention the countless who are dying from an ever poisoning atmosphere of an increasingly violent geophysical catastrophe.

Guilty landscapes drift through our presents, and those of us who do not repudiate the past make new compacts with its crimes.

Are there any kinder presents?

I began to think of myself in the third person. The "I" was to feel with, the "he" for thought, both of us chance awarenesses, thrown off blindly from an indestructible thing-in-itself, willing itself forward. The thinking "he" hoped that the number of variants coming through the pass was in fact finite. The old couple had not lived to find out one way or the other, and could not have found out because endlessness cannot end; but in a finite series there would come a day when no new figures would appear on the trail, but any long time might just as well be endless...

You will have killed them all, if you can last long enough, "I" told myself.

And avenge how many worlds?

The world is full of rifle shops.

We were all dead once, "he" told me, so it cannot matter how many "I" kill as we devastate the planet and dream of infesting distant suns.

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**George Zebrowski's *Brute Orbits* won the John W. Campbell Award for best novel, and *Cave of Stars* (a companion to his classic *Macrolife*) was chosen for *Science Fiction, The 101 Best SF Novels 1985–2010*. Three of his short stories, including 'The Eichmann Variations' (1984), have been nominated for the Nebula Award, and 'The Idea Trap' was nominated for the Theodore Sturgeon Award. His latest novel is *Empties* (Golden Gryphon Press/SF Gateway). With Gregory Benford he co-edited *Sentinels In Honor of Arthur C. Clarke* (Hadley Rille Books). *Decimated*, ten collaborations with Jack Dann (Borgo Press/Wildside) has just been published.**

# iRobot

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## GUY HALEY





There is nothing but the desert, a landscape of dust and sand.



Dunes of dust creep across the land, dust sheets from their scimitar peaks. Ribbons of dust undulate swiftly up and down their sides. The dust makes the sky brown, the rising sun pale and dirty. Shrouds of dust chase each other through the air, tangling daylight in their umber strands. The sun retaliates, flaring a little brighter, calling shadows from the desert; hard and straight, traces of something beneath the sand.

There was a city here once.

Wind blows harder. Brick and worn concrete rise from the desert, grains of dust carried from them in torrents. The walls have lost their edges, worn smooth by the scouring sands. They are as cracked as ancient teeth, and yet in procession, taken from afar, unwavering. The lines and cells the walls describe are echoes of lost angles and cast geometry, straight where the dust is rippled and curled. In their simple precision the walls defy the fractal whorls of the dust, although they cannot win the battle, and have lost it many times before.

These are secret marks, conjured rarely when the light is just so, legible only to archaeology. Their testimony goes unread. There are no archaeologists any more.

Nor are there doctors, nor policemen. No bums, no vendors, no consumers, no mothers or fathers or children, no dogs or cats or bees or ants or trees. There is no one and nothing at all; nothing but brown dust and the ruins they suffocate, uncover, and suffocate again.

Something terrible happened here. When or what, nobody knows, because there is nobody left to know. Only the wind has a voice, but it says little; it does not care or remember.

In the lee of a broken wall two figures are revealed. One, huddled within the remains of long coat that flaps in the freezing wind, was once a man. Desiccated black flesh, hard as plastic, clings to yellow bones. Hair is still attached to his shrivelled scalp. His eyes are raisins in his sockets. His mouth is as wide as only the mouths of the dead can be, his tongue hard and sharp inside his jaw. He lies on one arm. The other is flung out. The bones of his fingers are outstretched toward the second figure, as if in supplication, or in revelation; the hand of an apostle reaching out to say "See! Here is the son of God".

There are no gods now.

The second figure is not human. It is blocky and broken and its torso is pitted by the actions of the elements. Of its four limbs, one arm remains. Two of the fingers on the hand of this arm have broken away. It remains cloaked to its waist in the sand, coyly hiding the stumps of its legs. The wind pushes grains of sand from globules of melted plastic and metal scattered around the machine like dropped pearls. The ground they rest on is fused to glass.

For much of the year the machine is hidden. Summer storms periodically uncover the city, and then it and its companion. Shifting ramparts build themselves up to the shattered chestplate and fall away to the whim of the wind. The sports of dust are relentless, and have no winner.

The robot still has a head, a cartoonish facsimile of a human being. Its eyes are broken. Those parts of its solar array that are whole are scrubbed opaque, as is the screen upon its chest.

The machine has been dying a long time, but it is not yet dead.

As the veiled sun strikes the machine, something sparks inside. Images, as indistinct through the robot's ruined screen as the sun is indistinct in the ruined sky, flicker and dance.

"Good morning," the robot's voice speaks. It does not matter in which language, it knows them all in any case, and the speakers of languages are all dead and gone from the Earth. "Good morning. I have four thousand and five reminders!" Without preamble, it begins. Music, the choice of a person whose dust is at one with all the other dust, crackles in the background. "Parminder is 1,723 years old today!" The reminders are the longest part of its liturgy, reminders of things that were missed. Birthdays in the main, where cards were not sent. Others are appointments never kept, and prompts to attend regular meetings that ceased to be regular long ago. The machine recites them all with equanimity. Its voice is faint but cheerful, although a buzz mars it. At its sound the wind seems cowed, as if offended. The recitation takes a long time. Finally, it is done.

"Last twittles: Moshi Horowitz is having palm-steamed yam for breakfast. Liam's train is late again, but he is enjoying a bacon sand-



wich. Melinda is very tired, but last night was fun! Rodrigo Anamate says you must check out this link. Link unavailable. No further messages. These messages are 619,423 days old. Delete? Please repeat. Voice command only. My touch screen is damaged. Please have me serviced at your earliest convenience. I am not connected to the internet. Searching for wifi connection."

For a while the silence is given back to the wind, to break or not as it chooses.

"No wifi detected."

Silence again. The silence lasts the rest of the day. Today is a bright day by the standards of the era, and at times almost warm. The passage of time is uncertain. Noon is a blur in a different part of the sky, afternoon a smear near the horizon. Brown day makes way for grey dusk. Night comes swiftly. There are no stars.

The glow from the robot's screen is a lonely light. The world retreats within it, becoming a square patch of sand with sloping sides, framing a dead man's outstretched hand. His bones gleam like gold.

The robot is limited. It is programmed to show concern, yet not to be intrusive. In its mind, flickering so erratically now, a facsimile of compassion gives rise to a need to reassure. "I am afraid I cannot answer your last queries," it says. "I am not equipped to make fire. I do not know how to make fire. I do not know the location of water. I cannot make water. This information is not available to me. I am not connected to the internet. I am sorry.

"You are quiet," it says. "Are you sad?"

Again the machine falls silent as its worn brain searches for something to cheer this last master.

"I have some amusing footage of kittens, if you would like to see it."

The night wears on. The machine's solar charge runs out, the light dies.

The wind tucks the city back in, into its blankets of dust.

Guy lives in Somerset with his wife Emma, young son Benny, a Malamute called Magnus, and an enormous, evil-tempered Norwegian forest cat called, ironically, Buddy. He has published novels with Angry Robot (the Richards & Klein series) and Solaris (*Champion of Mars*). Visit him online at [guyhaley@wordpress.com](mailto:guyhaley@wordpress.com).

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# JIM HAWKINS

## SKY LEAP-EARTH FLAME

*"Why is sky blue, Mariam?"*

*"I don't know. Ask Victor."*

*"Can you touch it, Mariam?"*







The grass around the tanks kept itself a perfect green and at a perfect height of half an inch. There were small hills, rocky outcrops, and sudden patches of sand. Over to the east there was a lake that stretched beyond the horizon, and sometimes she spotted a sailboat with white canvas taut in the breeze.

Axon had given up asking her to walk on the water out to the sailboats, but Axon loved it when Mariam stood beside the lake and squeezed the warm mud between her toes. Or when she stripped off and swam in the clear water, diving sometimes to catch sight of a silver-green fish or the tentacles of an octopus peeping out from a reef crevice.

There was no sensation – hot, cold, warm, rough, slippery, prickly, or smooth – that Axon would not take in and absorb. If Mariam cut herself, Axon was fascinated by the bleeding, the scab, and the scars.

Mariam was twelve years old, with coal-black hair, dark eyebrows and a slim, athletic body. She liked to keep her hair tied back, but sometimes Axon wanted her to let it blow around her face, and mostly she did, unless she was in a mood, which was usually because Victor had told her she was stupid.

Usually she was forbidden to go near the tanks, but today was Axon's *Layer Day* and she was smart enough to know that they didn't want her there for the fun of it. She walked down the slope over the perfect grass towards the white domes of the tanks, her flip-flops smacking against her heels and the light almost too bright to bear.

"What will it be like, Mariam?" asked the soft voice in her head.

"I don't know. I will be with you."

"Will it hurt?"

"I don't know. If it hurts you, it will hurt me."

"Are you afraid?"

"Who taught you afraid?"

"Victor."

"Is Victor afraid?"

"Yes."

"I'm not."

"Is there time for swimming?"

"No."

"That's a shame."

"Are you afraid, Axon?"

"I'm trying. I know it, but I can't feel it."

The gate in the electric fence around the tanks opened, and Mariam walked in, head high, but very scared. Her twin, Victor, was already standing on the concourse beside the nearest of the mushroom-like buildings, shading his eyes from the intense light. Mariam was tanned and lithe. Victor was paler, heavier, disliked physical activity, but they were still clearly identical twins. Axon sometimes jokingly called them Exo and Endo – she was a child of the wind and the waves, and Victor was a more cerebral cave-dweller.

"Hi," said Victor. This in itself was unusual. Normally they communicated through a private gateway they shared in the Axon interface. But today was different – very different. It was *Layer Day*.

A door in the mushroom-dome's sixty-foot stem slid open and their foster mother, Julia, beckoned them in.

All the adults they knew were in the conference room, and several they had never seen before. Nobody was smiling as they took their seats. It felt as though they'd failed an exam or been caught stealing.

"Don't worry, Axon," she thought. Silence. She looked at Victor and thought "Can you get Axon?" He shook his head.

Director Somerton stood up and came to sit beside them. "During this phase we have to cut your link to Axon," he said. "This is just a precaution."

"Against what?" Victor asked, in his belligerent way.

Somerton ignored Victor's tone, and went on: "This is a critical stage. I will be honest with you – you're both growing up fast and you have a right to know. There have sometimes been complications. It's better for you if we play safe. So we're going to put you in a light sleep for the next few hours and slowly bring back the link when we think it's safe, which I'm sure it will be."

Victor started to say something, but Mariam shushed him quiet. "I refuse," she said.

Somerton was momentarily shocked, but then recovered and said, "I'm sorry, Mariam. I don't quite understand you."

She was quivering, finding it hard to breathe,



but she forced the words out. "I will not be cut off from Axon. I will not be put to sleep."

"Why?"

She stood up and ran out of the room. The outside doors slid aside and she kept on running until she reached the gate through the perimeter fence. It wouldn't open. She stood there, staring out at the grass, with her hands on the grill, suddenly crying, until a hand stroked her back. Finally she turned, expecting to see Julia. Instead, it was Victor.

"I suppose they sent you!" she shouted.

"No," said Victor. "I decided I agree."

Inside, Somerton paced around the room. "The culture is ready," he said. "We must proceed."

Normally, Julia was silent in meetings. She was tiny, beak-nosed, like a small bird, but now she stood up and said, "No." She marched up to the much taller figure of the Director and faced him.

"They're like triplets. They've been in each others' minds for twelve years. Are you surprised they don't just go along with you chopping them off?"

"They're children."

"Those two are not *just* children, are they? They are nearly teenagers, and they have a right to be included. If they want to maintain the link, that's their decision. Explain it to them. If they want to refuse an anaesthetic, that's their decision. They are *not* laboratory rats."

Somerton turned and faced the science team. "Well?" he asked.

The Senior Biochemist looked at her watch and said, "We have two hours at most to begin layering. If we have to abort it will take four months to breed and verify another batch. The ship is ready and waiting for our signal. They will not be pleased."

"This is not a democracy, normally, but in this instance I would like to see a show of hands. Should we proceed with the operation with the links open and the children conscious?"

All present raised their hands. Somerton turned back to Julia. "Explain the danger to them, ask them one more time, and then we go ahead either way."

**Mariam and Victor** were walking around the inside of the perimeter fence. They had never

been to this area before. As they passed the main mushroom building they came to a section of fence with a very big gate that could slide aside on rollers, but now refused to budge when they pulled it. A wide concrete road led back from the gate to a high door in a cube-like building with a cluster of antennae on the roof. The road had parallel metal strips with grooves which ran out under the gate and onto a vast grey road with scorch-marks clearly visible and in the distance a group of white-painted parallel stripes.

"What are they for?" Mariam asked, pointing at the metal strips.

"I think they're tracks. Maybe you could run wheels along them."

They had never witnessed Julia move fast before, but she came sprinting up to them.

"Please listen to me," she said. "I'm very sorry. We never told you everything. You were too young. We don't have much time, but let me explain as quickly as I can."

**The human brain** contains something like a hundred billion neurons. Nobody knows the real count. Each neuron may connect with up to seven hundred others, making an incomprehensibly complex network. The brain weighs about one point five kilos and has a volume of something like twelve hundred cubic centimetres.

The volume of the two-metre diameter sphere in the centre of the cube-like building was over four million cubic centimetres – the capacity of more than three hundred human brains. It was supported in an alloy framework connected to hoists above. The lights were dimmed and only a diffuse red glow, like a photographic darkroom, lit the lattice of steel pipes that ran from the titanium sphere, through ducts in the wall, and into a second chamber. Technicians clad in full bio-hazard suits adjusted settings on a large touch-screen panel to one side.

In the wide-windowed observation room set high in the wall, Julia sat between Mariam and Victor. Somerton stood to one side, nearer the window, blinking more rapidly than usual. "Begin," he said.

"Am I looking at myself, Mariam? Victor?"

"I don't know. Think about something nice."

In the next-door chamber digital read-outs

on the breeding tanks were steady. Nano-scale sieves measured the exact structure of the stem cell clusters and trapped any that were less than perfect, and the perfect were fed forward to a holding tank.

Through the observation window, as though watching a silent movie, they saw the red-lit sphere begin to rotate about its vertical axis, apparently hanging from the umbilical tubes that entered the centre of the top. On the far wall a projection lit up showing a three dimensional model of the interior of the sphere. It was like a shell with a nut inside. The nut was smaller than the outer shell – held in place by millions of fine struts, surrounded by the image of a light blue membrane. The sphere was not yet full.

The female voice over the loudspeakers was so sudden and loud that everyone was startled. “Lowering temperature now,” she said. Unseen, viscous chilled cooling fluids moved through capillaries in the central mass of the sphere. Within a few seconds the temperature read-out on the tank dropped five degrees.

*“I have no word for this. Thought slow...fragments, maybe...discontinuity... Sky leap – Earth flame.”*

“Start cell delivery.”

In the vat chamber, pumps began to spin up, pushing billions of cells in their nutrient wash slowly through sterile pipes from the final holding tank towards their destiny. The projection showed a steadily rising tide filling the space between the central core and the shell of the containment sphere.

“There’s no more room after this,” said Victor. “Is this the final layer?”

“Yes,” Julia replied. “This is the OCC – the Outer Cortical Complex. When the barrier dissolves, these cells will evolve billions of links into the earlier layers.”

Mariam shivered. “Axon is cold,” she said.

“No,” Julia said. “Axon is not cold. Axon has no sensory feelings itself. You are the feelings. You are Axon’s skin, eyes, smell, instinct, arms, and legs. That is your purpose.”

Again, there came the calm voice over the loudspeakers in the observation room. “The layer is stabilised. Raising the temperature to normal minus one. Preparing to dissolve the

barrier. Permission is required.”

Somerton gripped the handrail in front of the wide window, looked back towards Julia and the children, and said, “Proceed.”

New fluids entered the sphere. The temporary membrane surrounding the original core of the Axon brain – the *dura mater* – thinned and its dead cells were washed away. Very slowly the impenetrable wall between the old cells and the new grew thinner. On the big display the blue was steadily eroded and became patchy. At the same time, internal blocking membranes dissolved, and what was a place of many rooms became one. Tendrils of tailored neuronal fibre spread through the new tissue like a root system growing at an impossibly fast rate. Microscopic tubules carrying oxygen and nutrients followed.

It hit Mariam like a tsunami. The world vanished, and huge arcs of geodesics, star-fields, vector-diagrams, swiftly-changing complex mathematical functions, planetary systems and galaxies swamped her with colour and deep ringing sounds like a vast tolling of underwater bells. And then, suddenly, she felt a terrible pain, and screamed.

Medics who had been standing near the children with their hands behind their backs, as though merely observing, brought the gas-powered syringes forward and sprayed anaesthetic directly into their carotid arteries.

Inside the building, on the outside of it, around the perimeter fence, and throughout the world, biohazard warnings lit up and flashed.

“Switch the HUD on!” Somerton shouted. A technician on the floor below pressed a finger on a panel and an incomprehensible green text overlay appeared on the window, scrolling fast.

INTERPENETRATION FAILURE-LEVEL RISING.  
CORE TEMPERATURE RISING. RE-COOLING INITIATED.  
CORTICAL ACTIVITY SYMMETRY IS COLLAPSING.

As the soothing coolants flowed into the maddened biological brain that was Axon, the medics lifted Mariam and Victor onto wheeled stretchers and pushed them down long white corridors to the hospital suite, Julia walking alongside.

“Prognosis? Assessment?” Somerton snapped at the Senior Biochemist, who was standing next



to him. She took a step backwards, ran her fingers through her blonde hair, and said, "I did warn you that this was a dangerously large volume to layer at one time."

"I didn't ask for a history lesson!"

"This is not just a brainstorm. This is a hurricane. We were prepared and we're doing what we can, but it looks at the moment like total network collapse."

Axon raged in random fury and fever. The trees of logic grown over years fell apart. The music of the synapses lost all coherence and was swamped in chaotic noise. The older connections fought the new, and the new knew nothing except their urge to be, to be something, to be a link, or a constant, or a function, or the signature of the scent of a rose. Fractal patterns swept through the complex of tissues. Filaments grew and shrank, touched and embraced or touched and withered, as their electrical charges and biochemical payloads summed or negated.

Evolution can be slow. To build a hawk or a daffodil can take several million years. But it can also be very fast. Axon's brain was a war zone as strategies competed. But eventually, all wars come to an end.

Thirty-seven hours later the anaesthetists turned off the systems which had been keeping Mariam and Victor safe from the storm in their bunker of unconsciousness.

Mariam's first thought was not hers: "*I could do with a swim.*" She smiled as the nurse held the plastic beaker of water to her lips.

Victor opened his eyes and saw a thought that was an equation. "*Sparse search on eleven dimensional vector space in  $\log(n)$  time. Not bad for a twelve-year-old!*"

**The ship** was two thousand metres long and shaped like an elongated silver ovoid with lattices of filigree golden wire at each end, like a vast insect egg trapped between the centres of two magical spiders' webs that connected to – nothing. The light from the star reflected from its body and drive webs, but here there were no eyes to see its strange beauty. It orbited the star silently, patiently and entirely automatically. Yes, it did contain life – plants, seeds, soil, saplings, mature olive trees, fish, sheep, ravens and cab-

bages – but they were all frozen and silent in the hold. The control bridge, with its comfortable chairs and wraparound 3D screens was empty. All was dark; the screens and tell-tale lights were of no use to a room without observers.

Sixteen navigational and systems computers controlled the ship's status constantly and voted on any required action, which, since they had arrived into the vicinity of the star Angelus XI three hundred Earth days ago, had been next to nothing apart from a unanimous decision to send a mining drone to a metal-rich asteroid within easy reach.

It had been a long journey. The silicon-based computers could not manage the complexity of a level three void jump, and they'd coasted here at only near light-speed.

The ship was waiting.

In an orbit perpendicular to the ship a strange object moved around Angelus XI. Take a can of beer and add a cone to one end and half of a transparent ball to the other. Add gigantic light-catching wings radiating from its waist, and colour it a blue so deep it bordered on the ultraviolet. Now, expand the length of the can to fourteen thousand metres, and spin it slowly around the long axis. Add some powerful transmitters that broadcast, on a sweeping frequency band covering most of the electromagnetic spectrum, the following message: "*Bio-containment station Alpha Delta Epsilon Theta Seventeen. Warning. Unauthorised approaches within one million kilometres will trigger lethal and indiscriminate attack. This facility is protected with a network of cloaked military drones with a lot of fire-power and a minimal sense of humour. Have a very nice day.*"

Times passes. That's its job. Sixteen-year-old Victor was sitting on the beach beside the lake eating something that resembled a hamburger. He refused to go into the water where Mariam floated, flipped and dived.

"Why won't you show me the world?" Victor thought.

"*It's not allowed.*"

"Why not?"

"*Don't be stupid, Victor. If I could tell you why, you would see it. Go for a swim while you can.*"

"And if I don't?"

*"I won't share some quite cute solutions for quantum gravity. No swim, no tell."*

Victor kicked off his shoes, his T-shirt and shorts, walked down to the edge of the water, and stuck his toes in. "It's freezing!" he yelled. Mariam emerged from the lake very close to the shore and splashed water over Victor. He ran back up the beach, swearing.

In the cluster of buildings that housed the Axon development system, Somerton was hosting a five-hour crucial meeting of the full team. "This," he said, "is the decision point. If there are any doubts you must articulate them now."

One by one the teams voted. Only the Senior Biochemist raised an issue. "The complexity of Axon is now, as we would expect, far beyond our diagnostics. However, we can see some zones that are constantly changing – changing faster than we would expect. Specifically, these are in the *inferior temporal gyrus* region. We predict that this pattern will eventually stabilise, but I must flag up this slight anomaly. We have no objection to advancement."

"Very well," Somerton said. "Many of you have given the best years of your lives to this project. There have been differences, and quite properly so, but we move towards our goal united in the will to succeed. I hereby authorise advancement to level Sigma."

Far away, the ship decoded a signal and began to move.

Julia walked down from the Centre towards the lake as the flyer came in low over the beach with a sound like a deep breath. They ran towards her.

"What was that?"

"Get dressed. Then you really can come and see your world."

The gate to the runway was open. The flyer was parked on an apron area, gleaming bright blue, its hatch raised and stairs ascended into its interior. Even Victor's constant stream of questions ceased as they walked across the apron following Julia. Axon was also unusually quiet.

Mariam thought "What is it?"

*"I'm too busy to talk,"* came the reply.

"Come," Julia said, and led the way up the stairs into the flyer. Three rows of light blue seats were arranged just behind the wide windscreen.

Behind them was a large cargo area. Everything was tastefully colour-coordinated – what might have been harsh edges rounded and softened.

"This is a flyer," Julia said. "Sit in the front seats. This is the most important day of your lives. So far, at least."

As soon as they sat down, shoulder restraints moved gently into place. Julia had taken the control seat. Had Mariam and Victor lived in a different place in a different time they might have been concerned at the lack of any visible controls and any sign of a pilot. Julia inspected the flyer's identification code neatly stencilled onto the bulkhead below the windscreen. Some things, over centuries, slip from languages and cultures, whilst others stick and are still used when their origins are lost in obscurity.

"Charlie Delta Golf," she said.

"Yes, Julia," a soft male voice responded.

"Lock my voice only."

"Yes, Julia."

"Depart the facility, and then fly a circumaxial route at three thousand meters and just above stall speed."

"Yes, Julia."

The cabin door swung downwards and closed with a hiss.

"Performing mandatory biohazard check."

A stream of almost invisible nano-scale particles issued from a vent in the roof of the flyer and formed tenuous clouds around the three of them.

"What's this?" Victor demanded.

"A routine check to see if we have any infections that might cause problems for other people."

The nano clouds swept back into the roof and the flyer said "Cleared for take-off." Powerful fan jets wound up to a roar and they began to taxi out to the runway, turning to face a long strip of lights that stretched away into the distance. Then they accelerated quickly, the nose lifted, and the flyer headed for what Mariam and Victor knew as the sky.

Overhead it seemed misty. Below, the buildings of the Facility shrank, and at two thousand feet it was clear that this was a tiny world that was like an undulating disc of green hills and sparkling water. Then, ahead of them, the mist began to move and a circular aperture appeared



in what they thought of as the sky, but was really a huge inflated dome of light biologically impermeable plastic. When the opening reached a diameter precisely two metres wider than the flyer's wings the expansion stopped. Seconds later the aircraft passed through, and the hole in the dome began to close.

Mariam and Victor gasped as they realised they had been living in a small bubble inside a vast space. The inside of the Bio-Containment station Alpha Delta Epsilon Theta Seventeen was a cylindrical space thirteen thousand metres long and many kilometres in diameter. A white tubular structure ran along the entire axis, and from it service and support spokes radiated down to a curving landscape of farms, villages, workshops, parks, lakes, harbours and roads.

"Did you know this, Axon?" Victor thought – a thought coloured, perhaps, with tints of anger. *"I did."*

"Why didn't you tell us?"

*"It was not permitted. Or, to put it another way, it was not possible."*

"Is there more you can't tell us?"

The flyer descended to a thousand feet and then flew low. The huge cylinder seemed to rotate below them.

Julia received a brief message in her transparent earpiece, and said, "You're talking to Axon. Would you like Axon to explain, or shall I?"

"Both," Mariam said.

"I'm too busy," Axon said. Mariam repeated this to Julia, and added, "What's Axon doing?"

"Developing. Growing very fast. Learning interfaces. Testing controls. Now – look over there – you see that white dome? It's another bubble, like the one you were born and brought up in. There are eight domes. Each dome has, or had, a thing like Axon growing inside it. Charlie Delta Golf, fly the axis – close."

"Yes, Julia."

The flyer rose and turned from its track inside the circumference of the cylinder, and rotated so that 'down' was now the thirteen kilometre extent of the axial tube. The engine noise reduced to a low hiss as it changed from full- to low-gravity mode and the atmospheric pressure reduced to near-nothing. It was now less of an aircraft than a space shuttle, steered and propelled by impulse

and correction jets of superheated steam. From the interior it seemed to be flying a straight line along the axial spine, but was in reality moving with a corkscrew movement to compensate for the rotation of the cylindrical worldlet.

Julia spoke to the flyer again, and dipped towards the wall that closed the end of the giant cylinder. At 'ground' level a door slid upwards and closed behind them as soon as they had flown in. They landed silently on a grey steel floor, next to three other flyers, each brightly coloured. The hangar was high and wide, with tool bays, hoists, service pits and gantries. Julia watched Mariam and Victor carefully, prepared to halt this voyage of discovery if they were being mentally overloaded. But, subliminally, they knew all this because the knowledge had been implanted subtly and appeared only in dreams. They chattered endlessly, pointing things out to each other.

"Come," Julia said, as the restraining arms slid back into their chairs, the hatch opened, and the stairs touched the floor with a quick clang of metal on metal.

When the human-scale door opened into the next chamber the bright light of Angelus XI flooded the hangar and they squinted at this new shock to the senses. As they entered they saw through the thick glass windows the uncountable splash of the fiery points that made up the Milky Way.

Mariam shivered. "It's all so...big," she said. "Too big."

A huge egg-like shape covered the sky as the ship completed its deceleration phase, and, with machine precision, matched orbits with the rotating worldlet.

"What's that?" Victor asked.

Julia put her arms about their shoulders and said, "That, my darlings, is your new home."

**Axon's spherical container**, with umbilicals connecting to temporary nutrient tanks, pumps, sensory interface cables, all on a metal-wheeled base, rolled slowly and carefully out of the bay doors in the side of the containment, surrounded by a posse of anxious attendants, and an even more anxious Director Somerton. Victor walked beside him, asking an endless stream

of questions, until Somerton finally told him to go and pester somebody else.

Mariam swam in the lake, diving for flashing silver fish, floating on her back looking up at what she once thought was the sky, and now knew to be the canopy of the containment dome lit by the huge artificial sunlight generators arrayed along the axial spine far above.

*"You are sad, Mariam,"* Axon's thought-voice said, gently.

"Am I? Yes, I think perhaps I am. I shall miss the fish."

*"There are lakes and fish in the ship."*

"Not these fish. These are my fish."

*"I understand."*

"Do you, Axon? Can you?"

*"I am in you. You are in me. These are my fish, too."* A long pause, and Axon added, *"They want you to get ready."*

For one last time she flipped onto her stomach, pointed her heels up at the fake sky and moved down among the fish, the weeds, the crabs in the rocks on the lake bed – staying underwater until she was nearly at the shore.

The rails ran to the base of the nearest spoke connecting the floor of the cylinder to the axis. At the base of the fifty metre wide spoke, inside the wide doors that had hissed aside, a pressurised lift waited. The strange procession of Axon and his attendants rolled slowly into the lift. Clamps secured the sphere and its equipment to the floor, and were checked and double checked. People took to seats around the circumference of the lift, and buckled harnesses. The doors closed, the air pressure increased a little as the lift sealed itself and began to rise within the spoke. A cloud of smart nano filled the air with a fine mist – probing the humans for traces of unpermitted viruses of microbial life, and, where necessary, purging, excising, cleaning.

Somerton's pad beeped as it displayed a message from Axon. It was a crude way of communicating, but only Mariam and Victor had the complex web of sensory fibres and high-speed electromagnetic receivers and transmitters that enabled communication at the most intimate cerebral level. He flicked his finger across the pad to enable voice input.

"Totally impossible," he said. "The only bio-

logical entities allowed onto the ship are Mariam and Victor, and you know that."

Alarms at various pitches and volumes shrieked and warning lights lit up the monitoring panels around Axon. The lift's steady point eight G rise stopped as emergency overrides kicked in. Panicking engineers frantically released their harnesses and struggled awkwardly in what was now severely reduced gravity.

As suddenly as it started, the violent noise stopped and the warning lights returned to green. Somerton's pad beeped again.

*"We are in command of the ship, not you. It is simple. It is safe. It is necessary. You will help me with this tiny kindness, or the ship is going nowhere. Axon."*

Nearby, Victor laughed. Axon was sharing this with him, but not Mariam. Somerton thumbed his panel and was not amused. At the weightless point where the spoke entered the axial tunnel the lift entered a zone where 'up' and 'down' were meaningless, and changed to what could well be described as 'along', traversing the axis inside a smaller tube within the larger.

At the end of the axial tube airlock doors opened and the lift slid into the lock and stopped. Hatches in the walls of the lift opened, revealing ranks of white pressure suits. They began to pull them on, awkward in the low gravity. Tell-tales flashed amber and then green on each suit. All but Mariam and Victor clipped tethering ropes to cleats on the floor.

"Mariam – Victor – clip your tethers on," Julia said.

"Axon says not to bother," they responded as one voice. Somerton frowned and then decided to say nothing. Satisfied that all suits were safe, the lift lit a sign saying DEPRESSURISING and the air was sucked out of both the airlock and the lift. The sign changed to VACUUM and the doors opened onto the sight of a cylindrical docking bay the size of a dozen cathedrals. In the distance, shuttles of many kinds and sizes were clamped into bays around the internal circumference. The great circular eye of the dock was open – shutters folded back outside like petals of dark grey radiation-blocking metal and plastic. Hanging in front of them exactly fifty metres away was a box-like silver shape – one of the



ship's non-atmosphere cargo transports. Away in the distance that gigantic form of the ship was a brilliant ellipse in the angled light of Angelus XI.

The transport steadily moved closer, robot arms extending ready to grasp Axon and its support tanks.

"No need to wait for me," Axon said, the tone unusually cheerful. "Step out of the door – I have you."

The two sixteen-year-olds fought to overcome their fear of falling and stepped slowly out of the lift door. Jets on their suits moved them out into the hangar, and they were turning to face the door of the lift and the figures floating inside and around it on their tethers.

"I think it is customary to wave," Axon said. So they waved, and the anonymous space suits waved back. And then they were accelerating, out of the hangar, past the incoming transport and into space, racing towards the ship. Victor was not happy, but Axon could feel the smile on Mariam's face.

"I love it," she said. "It's like swimming! Star diving!"

So Axon took her in a series of loops, dives, spin-turns and crazy corkscrews around the unwaveringly straight track of Victor, who would have white-knuckle gripped the arm-rests of whatever seat he was riding on, but there was no seat and no arm-rests. Behind them the transport entered the dock; a telescopic arm extended into the lift and, attaching to Axon's support platform pulled the protected, but still fragile, cargo of biology into its hold.

And so the months of training began. The command deck of the ship was in the centre of the egg-like structure, surrounded by layers of decks and parks. The thick outer shell was hollow and filled with its own skins of radiation-damping liquid hydrogen, polyethylene and water. Each of the 'floors' of the one hundred and twenty eight decks was made of a hybrid of concrete and tailored plastic.

Not many tissue-damaging particles were going to get through to the yolk at the heart of the ship.

The deck was a sphere of seamless 3D display panels, punctuated by some hatches to the living quarters and the chamber which held Axon and

its support systems. Four couches were attached on gimbals to a central column.

"Why four?"

"Did you think they'd build something this big just for you?"

Mariam and Victor had explored many areas of the ship, but most of it was secured and Axon refused to open the whole vastness on the inarguable grounds that many sectors were moth-balled, and it would be a waste of energy to open them merely for pleasure trips.

"You have diagrams, schematics, 3D models, images – what more do you want?"

"I like to touch things," Mariam answered. But on their birthday, when they had been greeted with a tuneless rendition of 'Happy Birthday To You' over a video link to base, Axon summoned them both to the control room and issued some instructions. Victor, he sent to a newly-unlocked Virtual Reality games centre, where he spent eight hours slaying Hell-Spawn with a variety of swords, axes, razor-whips, soul-wands, firebolts and other hard and soft weapons, and discovered that a rail-gun is of absolutely no use against Undead Wraiths, although average Zombies could be fragged quite successfully.

Mariam followed her plan and navigated a maze of corridors and jump tubes until she reached a door with an illuminated red sign above it – NOT AVAILABLE. Then, as she was close to the door, the sign changed to a green heart and vanished. The door whispered open. She walked through into a chamber filled with sunlight. Surrounded by low grassy hillocks, a blue lake gleamed and rippled. Dragonflies darted over the water. House Martins swooped low over the surface, the blue reflecting on their pale breasts and making them seem exotic and rare.

She followed a narrow path to a strangely familiar rock jutting out over the lake, peeled off her clothes and followed the birds in a graceful dive. Under water she swam strongly and suddenly was in the centre of a host of silver fish, darting and flocking.

"Are these real fish?" she thought at Axon.

"They're not just real fish, Mariam. They're your fish."

"I don't believe you."

"Ask Victor. Dr Somerton was most displeased."

Mariam thought a giant smile, and took only the briefest of breaths before diving again and again amongst the flickering, shining creatures.

After they'd eaten their supper in what was called the crew mess, Axon said, *"You must both go immediately to level five, corridor seven, room seventeen."*

"Why?" Victor demanded.

*"These are not my instructions. I have no idea."*

Twenty minutes later they walked into a dome-like chamber with curiously-textured non-reflective walls. Seats faced a series of display panels. As soon as they entered, the doors closed and the lights dimmed.

The big central 3D display lit up and Julia appeared. "There's no need to be alarmed," she said. "This presentation is pre-recorded and will take one hour. Whilst in this room you will not be able to access Axon and he will have no access to you. You are of age now, and will soon know everything."

Julia walked away and Somerton stepped into view.

"For over fifty years now," he began, "we humans have tried to reach beyond the confines of our galactic arm. All but one attempt has failed, and that exception is not a happy story. Victor, you're fond of asking 'Why?' and that's the easiest of questions to answer. In four hundred years' time a dense ball of dark matter eight light years in diameter will fly through our local systems. The gravitational consequences will be devastating. Stars will collide. Planets will fall into their suns or be flung into the outer darkness. Nothing can survive. Many such catastrophes have happened in the history of the universe, but this will be *our* catastrophe. Our only hope is to escape it, destroy it, or deflect it.

"This information is not known by many. The truth behind it has been systematically discredited for centuries. Scientists have been persuaded into public scepticism, sent into exile, or even killed. Yes – killed.

"Long ago people thought the end of the Earth could be escaped by building ark ships, and we have inhabited planets around seventeen nearby stars. But now, that seems futile. None can evade the invisible destruction which is coming.

"No human mind can control a ship like yours. We cannot build computers complex enough to do so. Consequently, we started to harness the billion-year work of evolution – we began to build larger and larger biological brains. Most of these have failed. One did not – but an error caused it to die of an infection, stranding its ship and crew ninety-seven light years away.

"Your first mission is to rescue that ship and what it contains, which is vital for the survival of the human race. You will be briefed in more detail on that later. In the meantime, Axon trusts you, but you must be very careful. If you need to discuss things only between yourselves, come into this room."

Mariam lay awake in her cabin. Sleep refused to come. The simulations had come to an end, and the first real flight, their first defiance of the universe's unfeeling indifference, was only twelve hours away. Restlessly, her hand strayed across her breasts, her nipples stiffening under her fingers, and then slid slowly down her stomach.

*"It's nice when you do that."*

"Go away Axon, This is private."

*"Victor does it too."*

"I don't want to know."

*"I think you do. It's different, but similar. Sometimes he goes very fast, sometimes very slowly. Like you. I know what he thinks about. Shall I tell you?"*

"No."

*"He thinks about lying beside you, touching and kissing. He thinks about your breasts. He thinks about you opening to him. Don't you, Victor?"*

A long mental pause, and then Victor's thought voice: "Yes. Yes, I do."

*"So does Mariam. Don't you, Mariam?"*

Mariam's fingers were wet. "It is forbidden," she thought at them. "We are brother and sister."

*"That's what they told you. It's not true. You are from different gene pools. They modified a few things to make you look alike. There is no reason why you should not share your sexual feelings with each other. Even if you didn't know it, you have shared them with me. Perhaps that was part of the plan."*

Mariam rolled off the bed, pulled a shift over her head and left the cabin. Down the corridor, she opened Victor's room without going in, said,



"Isolation room. Now!" and continued walking.

"I don't like it when you go in there. Why do you want to cut me out?"

"Do you understand the word 'private'?"

"Of course."

"I don't think you do." She went into the isolation room and the door closed behind her. Soon after, Victor came in, looking flushed and embarrassed.

"Why do you think Axon is suddenly so interested in our sex lives?" she asked. "Why now?"

"No idea."

"Control. He's looking for ways to control us. So either Axon's lying or Julia and the others have lied to us. I think we need to find out."

Ten minutes later a sleepy Julia came on line and gave them the answer. Axon was telling the truth. "You should have told us!" Victor shouted. "What else does Axon know that we don't know?"

"We thought it was best for all three of you. I'm sorry if we were wrong."

As they were about to leave the room Mariam stepped in front of Victor. "If ever...if we ever...in here and nowhere else. Agree?" Victor nodded, and she went on: "Okay. Truth time. We have to know if Axon's using us for some hidden reason. So...when you...do you really think about me?"

He nodded slowly and looked away, whispering, "Sorry."

Mariam smiled and said, "Stop saying sorry. For some reason I'm not surprised. Perhaps I...well, to be fair, I should confess too. I often wonder what it would be like to touch you *there*. It's going to take a bit of getting used to."

"I know why they did it. They wanted to create a bond we couldn't break."

"I think those come in several flavours."

"I still love you, *sis*."

"And I still love you, *brother*." And then they burst into laughter. "There's one thing, though. If you're going to be my lover instead of my brother you're going to have to be a whole lot nicer to me."

Then she kissed him on the cheek, ruffled his hair, and went off to her cabin to sleep.

For twenty-six hours the reaction-mass engines accelerated the ship away from the containment

wordlet and the star Angelus XI, with its rocky planets and settlements. Mariam and Victor took four hour shifts, and Axon 'slept' for the last twelve hours whilst unconscious, massively-parallel processes assessed the constant data from the arsenal of sensors as they probed the space ahead of them at a deep level for a distance of many light years. Finally, the words they'd heard a thousand times in simulations rang out: "*Impulse engine shutdown in five seconds*." A pause for breath, and then the steady two-G push ceased. "*All ready?*" In the strange ordering of things evolved over seventeen years it was necessary for all three consciousnesses to agree before radical action could be taken. Three thought *yeses* committed them.

Outside the ship the mesh sails expanded, thinning to a web of mono-atomic threads. Power surged through the web. Axon sensed the multi-dimensional space around the ship, almost tasted the seething point-events in the quantum foam. Under Axon's control, the web twisted into planes and interlinked toroids, into cylinders with spheres, into spikes of filigree fronds, focusing, concentrating. Suddenly, the point-particles of the foam could not annihilate each other as they wished. The forces of annihilation were cancelling out. Unwilling to accept this breach of fundamental laws, space shifted, moving the ship into an absolute vacuum, falling down the front of a huge energy wave.

Right across the galactic arm, a burst of high-energy neutrinos signalled ignition. The entire ship's mass, its hull, its plants, fish and tiny human population experienced no acceleration forces. The bubble of modified quantum events simply translated itself elsewhere, although *where* is a complex concept in eleven-dimensional space-time. You might say that at the moment Axon released the field it had travelled twenty-seven light years – but *year* and *travel* didn't apply in any meaningful sense. It just was where it was not, and the universe repaired its minor injury. From ignition to shutdown had taken thirty-six seconds of ship time.

Displays which had blanked during the space-time shift began to light up.

"I'm sorry," Axon thought at them. "*I missed the target.*"

"By how much?"

"Eight point five three metres. I'll try to do better next time!"

Mariam and Victor slapped their restraining harnesses off, whooped and high-fived.

"Ship's status?"

"Checks are still running. So far, only trivial damage to a couple of X-ray sensors and a slightly higher level of radiation in the outer skin than expected. We appear to be stable. May I signal the damaged ship Iron Lady?"

"Agreed."

Multi-frequency lasers aimed at a point four hundred thousand kilometres ahead and pumped a dense burst of information down the beam. They sat calmly and waited. After seven minutes a screen lit up, showing a white-haired gaunt woman.

"That was quite a spectacular arrival. It's pretty dark out here, but you sure lit it up. Thank you. The *Iron Lady* is not in good shape. We have your ship identified as *Zbeta97gamma*. Do you have a friendlier name?"

Victor held down the MUTE button on his chair arm and said, "We never got around to naming the ship. Any ideas?"

"Oh yes," said Mariam. "Axon came up with the name a long time ago."

"Did I?"

"We'll have the champagne later. I name this ship *Sky Leap*. May she and all who travel in her be safe and happy!"

Others were steadily crowding in behind the woman – Renata – on the display. "We need to know," she said, "if your imploders are intact. Ours are, but we have no motive power of any sort."

"What imploders?" Victor and Mariam asked in unison.

Axon broke the link and the screen went dark.

"The forward halves of this ship and Iron Lady contain devices to collapse local space into super-massive black holes. The intention is to put these in place so that their immense gravity will sling-shot the dark matter object heading for the Orion-Cygnus arm of the Milky Way out of the ecliptic and off to who cares where."

"Why weren't we told? There seem to be a lot of things we weren't told!"

"There are consequences."

"Oh," said Victor, "I think I see. Unless the ships jump at exactly the right time we're going to get a close-up view of some very nasty event horizons."

"Correct."

"Oh, shit! It's a suicide mission."

"Look on the bright side," Axon said. "Iron Lady's central brain is totally dead. Without that the operation becomes almost impossible."

"I don't think *almost* is that bright a side," Mariam said. "I would prefer *totally* impossible."

The impulse engines powered up and *Sky Leap* accelerated towards *Iron Lady*; estimated journey time fifty-seven hours. As the adrenalin-rush faded, Mariam and Victor were suddenly hungry and thirsty. They dialled the food system in the crew mess to deliver kebabs, salad, and a bottle of champagne. When he'd popped the cork, Victor splashed champagne down the wall.

"What are you doing?"

"Ship-naming."

"Isn't the champagne supposed to be on the outside?"

"The door's that way. Off you go, sis."

"Ex-sis. Remember?"

"Oh yes. I very definitely remember."

"Good. Looks like we're going to die soon, so we may have to pack the rest of our lives into a couple of days. So don't take too long eating that kebab."

He was still chewing his last mouthful when she took the champagne bottle in one hand and his arm in the other, kissed him, and led him off towards the isolation chamber.

They were still lying in each other's arms when the alarms went off. Naked, they ran to the door. The second it slid back, blinding pain shot through their heads and they both screamed.

Victor pulled Mariam back inside the containment chamber and hit the manual door-close button. They leaned, panting, against the wall as the pain subsided. "Axon," Mariam said. "Something's seriously wrong."

Victor went to the control panel and cancelled the alarm. "System – diagnostics – Axon-specific." Data streamed down the right of the main



screen, and to the left a coloured diagram of Axon's spherical brain pulsed with bright green highlights. "Analysis," Victor snapped. After a few seconds a synthesised voice said, "*Ninety-four per cent of neurons are firing synchronously.*"

Mariam stared at the data. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Victor replied, "that Axon is having an epileptic fit."

"What can we do?"

"Wait. The support systems are supplying suppressants."

A chime sounded, the data shrank away, and Renata appeared. "Why are you initiating a jump?" she demanded.

"We're not," Mariam answered.

"Your webs are deploying and charging. Have you kids gone crazy? If you jump now you will annihilate us. You must stop it!"

Victor switched the diagnostics from Axon-specific to general, and there it was – clear evidence of the first stage of a launch.

"Axon's having a fit. We can't go outside this area without frying our brains."

"Look," Mariam said, pointing at the ship's schematic on one of the screens. Slowly, the front section was peeling back.

"Oh, my God!" Renata shouted. "He's arming the collapsers."

"I'm going to try to reach the control room," Victor said. "It's the only way."

Mariam grabbed him. "You won't make it!" she yelled. He shrugged her off, and headed for the door. Intolerable pain. Fire raging behind the eyes. Fear, torture, anguish, blindness. Victor stumbled on along the corridor trying hard to keep moving through the overwhelming horror in his head. He had no idea that Mariam was close behind him. They sensed without senses that they were in the control room, where warning lights were flashing red.

Victor forced himself to shout "Emergency power-down! All systems." He scarcely heard the request for multiple confirmation, or Mariam's strained "Confirmed."

Circuits disconnected. Pumps ceased to spin. The fierce pain in their heads reduced to the mere level of a bad migraine. Only emergency lights lit the chamber. Outside, the great flaps

at the front of the ship stopped moving, at half retraction, arrayed like petals around the bulbous hull.

"You're an idiot," Mariam said as they lay slumped in their chairs. "So are you," he replied.

"I hate to ask, but now what?"

The emergency power supply kept the control panels alight. Victor touched and swiped across them. "If we don't supply power to Axon's nutrient and oxygen supplies he'll be dead in ten minutes."

"Can we disable the link to us, and feed him?"

"No idea."

"Well start thinking."

"We need to talk to *Iron Lady*, so I'm restarting power to the isolation area, our life-support, and Axon's vital supplies. Done."

The lights in the control room came back on, and speech recognition systems re-booted.

"Power to the central brain – monitoring only."

The image of Axon's neurons still pulsed with abnormal regularity.

"Power to external telemetry and comms links."

After a pause, the worried face of Renata reappeared, and then she smiled and said, "Fantastic! How did you do it?"

"Victor hit the big off switch," Mariam said. "We're bringing systems back if they are not controlled by Axon. Victor, send the brain imaging to *Iron Lady*, please. Renata, do you have a doctor in your crew?"

"Three."

"Get them to look at the images. We need suggestions urgently. What's happening is outside the automatic brain control system's programming."

"Keep transmitting. I'll get to you ASAP."

Victor was carefully studying the complex diagrams of the ship's electrical systems.

"Apply power to distributors alpha theta nine-seventy and nine-seventy-one. Then close the forward doors."

"Weapons control is not available to you."

"Bollocks!" Victor shouted. "Give us control, now!"

"That cannot be done."

Mariam put her hand on his shoulder. "Calm down. There has to be a way around this. They

must have planned for central brain malfunction, surely?"

"If they did, it's something else they forgot to tell us."

Renata reappeared on the screen. "Can you give us control of the brain support systems? The medics want to send instructions to produce some drugs that should halt the seizure."

"OK, but I doubt if the ship will let you," Victor said.

"Oh - it will."

Shortly they watched the brain read-out as it was flooded with anaesthetics and seizure-suppressants. Slowly the storm calmed and normal sleep patterns emerged. And then the brain went dark. Warning signals flared on the control panel. Axon's support system went into over-drive, injecting adrenalin, administering electric shocks. But still, the mighty brain remained inert.

Axon was dead, and with him any hope of going anywhere. They stood silently for a moment, and then Victor turned towards the image of Renata.

"To put it in the vernacular," he said, "it looks as though you fucked up." Before she could reply he reached over and cut the comms link.

"Look," Mariam said. "The forward doors are closing. System - explain."

*"Fallback condition assigns full command to Victor and Mariam."*

"Restore the quantum webs to the rest position."

The webs slowly retreated.

"Restore full power. Correct the course alignment to previous targeting schedule."

*"Deceleration will begin in three hundred and twenty minutes. Alignment with Iron Lady in seventeen hours."*

"Victor," Mariam said, "I can feel your thoughts. Something's happening to us. And by the way, it's bad luck for men to baptise ships. Just thought I'd tell you."

They ate and then slept for a while, curled up together, exhausted, mourning the loss of Axon, their triplet. Then they were summoned to the isolation chamber, where a pre-recorded message from Somerton gave them a new briefing. Silently, *Sky Leap* slipped into position parallel

with *Iron Lady*. When they reopened the comms link to the other ship, Renata was furious. "You cannot cut communications like that. You will come over to *Iron Lady* in your shuttle immediately."

"On the contrary," Mariam said, perhaps too sweetly, "you will use your shuttles. All personnel on *Iron Lady* will be transferred to *Sky Leap* in the next eight hours."

"Impossible."

"Check the authorisation codes we've just sent you. Both ships are now under our command."

**Mariam and Victor** had never seen so many people before. Areas of the ship that had been mothballed were opened up, kitchens came to life and remembered how to cook, previously dark corridors were full of life.

During the next twenty-four hours, six hundred injections of newly-manufactured nano began to work on six hundred human brains.

Renata and the other senior members of the *Iron Lady's* crew were not taking kindly to having their power usurped by a couple of teenagers. Arguments raged in the control centre, until Victor banned them. Mariam was better at empathy, and went to great lengths over coffee and cakes to reduce the tension. "Look," she said time after time, "if you have a better idea, let's discuss it. Otherwise, the choices are, stay here and run out of everything, or take the risk that we can complete the task we came to perform." At last, if they didn't see reason, they saw inevitability; and they saw the truth that the supposed twins had more abilities than even they themselves knew.

At midnight, ship's time, the nano-injections had diffused through grey-matter. Every human was strapped securely into inertia-damping chairs. *Sky Leap* and *Iron Lady* began to accelerate in perfect synchronisation. For the first time in their lives, over six hundred souls heard a voice, not through their ears, but in their minds - the calm voice of Mariam. "Dear friends," she said, "*Iron Lady* is now slaved to this ship. We have begun the launch sequence. Our great brains failed us, so now we must link our small brains together and hope that we can succeed."

Outside petal-like doors folded back from



the noses of the ships, and the gossamer webs unfolded and expanded.

"Immediately after the collapsers have been launched," she went on, "we will turn and attempt to ignite the main drives. You may find it disturbing, possibly frightening, but you must not fight it. Victor and I were bred for this task, but we need each of you, and all of you, if we are to have any chance. Let us wish ourselves well."

In the control centre the one-time twins looked at each other. "This could be a rough ride," Victor said, and blew Mariam a kiss. "Let's do it." He issued the final command.

Missiles streamed from the nose of the ships. The impulse drives cut, and the bay doors were closing even as the great vessels changed course, turning away from the missile tracks. And then Victor and Mariam locked their brains with all the other brains and began the impossible calculus which could subject the quantum foam to their bidding. Strange fire crackled through the webs. Slowly, much too slowly, flickering erratically, the ships began their leap into the void.

To one side of the projected path of the massive cluster of dark matter that hurtled towards the

Milky Way, the collapsers fired. Matter turned on matter, dimensions distorted, and eight massive black holes erupted into terrible being. Gravity waves wracked the heavens. The gates of Hades were opened and the Furies unleashed. The pathways of the skies were re-mapping themselves.

At last, one lonely ship emerged from the roiling energies, its quantum webs destroyed, its outer shields ablated, stripped of sensors, black, inert. It was impossible to detect the name painted on the hull, or if there ever had been a name. But deep inside, a shoal of silver fish swam to and fro in a blue lake bordered with perfect grass and gently waving trees.

Jim started his first SF novel at the age of 10 and still hasn't finished it. His *Interzone* stories 'Chimbwi' and 'Digital Rites' were republished in Gardner Dozois' *The Year's Best Science Fiction* in 2011 and 2012. Jim now lives in Hull, teaches screenwriting at the university, and also has a software company. He's been a teacher, a BBC broadcaster, a sou-chef, a jazz pianist, a composer of orchestral works, an actor, and, for many years, a Hull City football supporter.

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TRACIE WELSER

a flag still flies over  
SABOR CITY



**“This will bring the whole thing down, to a standstill,”** says Mikhail. They’re running, running, running, voices pushed out in breathy bursts.

“You sure?” asks Roberto. “If we get caught...”

“You sound like that fuzz-chin baby Conrad. We’re *not* going to get caught.”

“Alright, then. A dare’s a dare.”

Both laugh, hearts pounding in their chests in time with the thumping of their regulation boots on the wet pavement.

At first glance, Mikhail is an unassuming figure: head-down, a hard-worker. His dark hair curls just an inch or two longer than regulation; not long enough to earn him a code violation, but risky enough to be stylish. He tucks it under his cap while in the work zone. When the evening shift ends, he puts away each of his fine tools, except for the special one that he keeps in his pocket, the one obtained through a faked requisition. He's fashioned a larger handle for it from a piece of an old broomstick, and it's good for opening small things.

As he leaves his station, he twists his cap at a rakish angle. He's wary, but careful to avoid appearing so. He walks down the moving sidewalk on Industry Avenue, away from the work zone and through the shared housing sector. The sun slides behind the factories through a steadily increasing drizzle of rain, casting an orange glow on other workers walking to and from work shifts. They trudge past in gray coveralls and caps, heads down and eyes averted. A tiny older man squints up at the angle of Mikhail's cap with a wry and disapproving expression, and then looks away. Mikhail weaves through the crowd to where the sidewalk stops, just short of a wall.

The concrete wall bisects the city, painted gray and dripping beads of rainwater. A sign with heavy black lettering says NIGHT DISTRICT: MIND THE CURFEW. When he steps through the wide opening in the wall, his shoulders relax, his gait slows and shifts into a saunter. He pulls a brown curl from under his crooked cap and glances back, once. No cameras track his movements on this side of the wall.

His friends converge on the Night District, crossing the line from the eastern agricultural zone and housing block. He spies Amrit, her dark hair in a neat regulation bob. The collar of her coveralls is flipped up, her signature statement of tiny rebellion. She hails their third, Roberto, from down the dark street. The stocky youth's painted face leers in the dim lamplight, and Amrit laughs, her brown hand covering her straight, white smile. Arms linked, they cross the street to where Mikhail waits, grinning, bouncing on the balls of his boot-clad feet.

"You got Drift?" he asks Roberto. Up close, Roberto's face paint is cracking already, and a

misting of rain runs in a tiny rivulet around one thick eyebrow. His friend nods, opens his palm to reveal the little tin of pills.

"Saved my whole week's allotment."

"I'm so primed for Drift," says Amrit. "My work shift today was the worst."

"Yeah, mine, too," Mikhail chimes in, too quickly. He fingers the tool in his pocket.

"If I never see another faulty component." She savagely rolls up the sleeves of her coveralls.

But, of course, she will, thinks Mikhail. The very next morning, no matter how much Drift she does tonight to forget. No matter how quickly she uses her allotment next week.

"Shift matron in my face, assembly audit, faster faster, blah blah."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Roberto admiring Amrit's diatribe, the fire of her form, her face. She's clever and animated, her chin juts forward, her narrow hips move in a swagger. She struts back and forth in a circle, imitating her shift supervisor's lumbering walk with exaggerated motions of her arms. Roberto's eyes move over Amrit's breasts, more apparent now that she's unfastened the top button of her coveralls.

"My shift lost music privileges today," Mikhail says helpfully. He forces himself to look away from Roberto.

"What? Those assholes," says Amrit. She halts in mid-swagger and links arms with him and Roberto. "Screw them."

"Forget them," Roberto says, and with his free hand passes around the Drift. Amrit accepts hers directly into her mouth with a high, fluting laugh. Mikhail places the smooth green tablet under his tongue. *Forget*. They jaunt together in the direction of the Hangout, between wet streets and neat, blank-faced buildings, leaving the curfew wall behind.

His friends continue their litany of complaint about the tedium of the work zone, as is fashionable to do. Mikhail inserts a nod or a laugh at appropriate intervals. His secret shame is that he loves his work. But he forgets that now, and from the gradual quieting of their chatter, he can tell that Roberto and Amrit are forgetting, too, as the Drift kicks in.

Soothing blankness rolls over him, and he knows they're experiencing it simultaneously



when Amrit comes to an abrupt stop just outside the Hangout. She shifts her arms from their waists to their shoulders and pulls them both close. In a huddle around her, they breathe the same breath, look into each others' faces. Amrit wears a slack smile. Roberto looks boyish and vacant behind his face paint, and Mikhail thinks of Roberto's first Drift, when he drooled an oval puddle onto the street where they sat slumped against a building. Mikhail gives a little laugh in his belly.

Amrit lets go and dances away to the open doorway of the Hangout, glancing over her shoulder, beckoning. Roberto gamely follows, but Mikhail freezes at her gesture, one which triggers a flood of memory.

This is the Drift. Not so much forgetting as remembering something better:

Amrit, bright-faced and eager, just a few months ago, a step ahead of him looking back over her shoulder. They're at the door of her shared room in the women's dormitory, and her bunkmate is away, in the infirmary for the week after slitting her own wrists. Amrit turns to open the door and glances back again, beckons him forward with a wiggle of her index finger. Her face is flushed.

The hour is late, and soon the curfew siren will sound over the loudspeakers. He pauses at the door. They could have coupled in a sanctioned room in the Night District, but she likes the thrill of the forbidden. He steps into the room, and the memory blurs into soft, aching sweetness; the touch of her hand on the back of his neck, his hand slipping between the metal buttons of her coveralls, impossibly tender lips pressing into his, her eyes wide and mouth agape as he enters her. Then, her look of disappointment when the curfew siren sounds, and he pulls away.

He'd crept out into the cold afterward feeling both triumphant and ashamed. The next day, Amrit acknowledged him in the work zone with a wave, as though nothing had taken place between them. She never spoke of it again.

He blinks, and he's in the Hangout. Music pulses in dim light, and through the crowd of coveralls, he spies Amrit dancing with Roberto. Her arms twine with his, and her open-mouthed smile is bright against his black hair as they

move together lazily to the rhythms of the music. Around them, slack faces float in the darkened room, all under the influence of Drift. Mikhail dances with a woman with vacant eyes who whispers repeatedly into his ear, "James, James," as she relives some pleasant memory. He's dazzled by the music, by the smoothness of the woman's bare neck against his cheek. He allows himself to pretend she's Amrit. She even smells like Amrit, like soap.

"We want you to meet someone," Amrit is saying, and the stranger is gone. His two friends take him by the arms, and he's whisked away from the dancing faces, past a screen displaying scenes from an old film. He's seen part of this one before; a man kills another man with a weapon because they both want a statue of a bird.

"I could build another one," he says, randomly.

"What?" Roberto shouts over the music and puts his ear closer to Mikhail's mouth, but Mikhail shrugs him off.

"He's drifting, is all," says Amrit. They steer Mikhail through the crowd.

The crowd parts, and individual forms dissolve: he's moving through a knot of people in the bright afternoon light to get to his work station. Paul, from the morning shift, is demonstrating a repair. The older man's hands shake a little as he holds the access panel open with one thumb and points into the interior of the tiny metal bird with a fine-pointed tool held between his other thumb and forefinger.

"Right there, see it?"

"Where? Oh, I see it, that one."

"I just couldn't quite. My hands aren't what they used to be, or my eyes," Paul says, apologetic. "I suppose they'll retire me soon, if they find out."

"Don't say that," Mikhail whispers. "Let me." He takes the bird, gently, like a living thing.

"Do you think you can do it?"

"I can fix it," Mikhail says.

"Fix what?" asks Amrit. He's sitting in a booth filled with people in the darkness of the Hangout. His hand is on Amrit's leg. He doesn't remember putting it there, but her leg is warm, thin and tantalizing through her overalls. She's painted his thumbnail a gleaming silver, using a tube of component fixative that he knows came

from her assembly work.

"Joseph was telling us about the sabotage at the water station and how his bunkmate got five months on the Turd Crew," Roberto says. He looks queasy under his face paint.

He gestures to a pale, lanky man with a slightly receded hairline who shares the booth. Joseph has a coppery brown tooth set in the middle of his bottom front teeth, and Mikhail wonders if it's a false one. They were fashionable a few years ago, when Mikhail was still an apprentice. He guesses that Joseph is at least three nursery-sets older, maybe four, than he and his friends.

"That one was stupid," says the girl on Joseph's arm. She's pretty but has a cruel look, something playing at the corner of her mouth. A predator, thinks Mikhail, like those extinct animals in nursery learning vids.

"At least he didn't get put in the box for it," says Roberto. He looks sidelong at Mikhail.

There's a revel in the flow of transgressive words and ideas, illicit conversation where words like "oppression" may as well be expletives. It's a game to them, a dare, to see how far the others will go, to send hot thrills down one another's backs and to feel that twist of sensation, like fear but more enticing, in their own stomachs. To utter words that can only be said aloud in the Night District.

"The best part is," says Joseph, "I've never been caught, not that time, not ever."

"Sabotage?" says Mikhail. "What for?" He tries to shake the Drift, stay present in the moment. He focuses his eyes on Joseph's brown tooth.

"So, Mikhail," says Joseph, as if noticing him for the first time. He pronounces the name like it is two words.

"So, Jo-seph," Mikhail replies, careful to replicate the man's mockery of his name. Roberto shakes his head and takes another green pill from his tin. Amrit giggles.

"What sort of name is that, Mik-hail?"

A pause, and a bubble of tension forms around them in the din and clatter of the club. The name-calling taunt, questioning a person's heritage, is as old as nursery dares. Amrit stiffens and shoots Mikhail a quick look.

Mikhail's temper rises through the fading Drift. He looks down at his free hand and sees a

bird cupped there. He knows it isn't real. Amrit focuses her moist brown eyes on his hand still resting on her knee and begins to coat his last unpainted nail.

"Are you mocking my heritage?" he says finally, the expected answer to the old call-and-response. He's cool, smooth like glass on the outside, his tone even and casual with just a touch of boredom.

"Heritage," says the girl, with a huff that is almost a laugh.

"Heritage is a bedtime story over the loud-speaker in the dorm at night," says Joseph. He and the girl exchange amused glances then look back at Mikhail. He says nothing, and his stomach feels cold.

"The state is our mother, our father," ventures Roberto. "Heritage is a sucrose-coated term for, um, the state agenda of genetic diversity."

"Ha, that's bold, I like you," says Joseph, sitting up to slap Roberto on the shoulder companionably. His movement dislodges the girl, whose name Mikhail hasn't learned.

"I have to piss," she says with a frown, and slouches off to the toilets.

Amrit looks up at Mikhail, smiles weakly. A moment is passing.

She pockets the fixative and turns to Roberto. "Wanna dance?"

**Mikhail stands** by the door to the toilets, slumping against the wall. He can see the dance floor. He eyes the pills in his hand, but not for long. Two are dissolving under his tongue when the girl comes out of the toilets.

"Waiting for me, or the toilet?"

"Neither," he says, glancing away.

"Amrit told us you used to be bold," she says, folding her arms.

"Yeah."

"Are you still?"

Mikhail shrugs.

He doesn't trust her but offers no resistance when she takes his hand. He floats through the crowded Hangout as though his legs and feet aren't attached to him. He slips into the Drift like warm bath water, and this time he yearns to forget.

Then: he's alone on a cool, dark street. Silence



sits deep like a presence. Away from the crowded dorm, the work station's bustle, the noise of the Hangout. His fingertips brush the rough surface of the painted concrete wall that surrounds the Night District. The sensation is soothing, the wall is solid and comforting. The wall exists to protect him, to protect them all, to delineate spaces for work and play, control and freedom, on either side. He stops, strokes the wall with both hands.

"Well, this is disappointing talk," Joseph is saying. The man's face is close, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "You don't seem like the wall-loving, flag-waving type."

"Because I'm not," he says, a bit too loudly. The noise of the Hangout pours back into his head with a roar, and he wonders what he's been saying.

"You've done some curfew-running over the wall, and now you've learned your lesson, is that it?"

"Amrit says this one's good with tools, locks, things like that," says the girl. "He should be able to get into the flag tower easy." She's still holding his hand, but she's talking to Joseph like Mikhail isn't there.

Joseph smirks. "You up for a dare, Mikhail, little friend, little man?"

"What, more nursery taunts?" Mikhail's fingers slide over the polished handle of the tool in his pocket. He senses danger, tries to hold on, but he's drifting again: it's early evening, and he and Roberto are standing on Industry Avenue in the fading light just after a work shift.

"Well, I dare you," whispers Roberto, and a freckled, red-haired kid named Conrad snickers. Conrad is second apprentice this rotation. He's at least two nursery-sets later than Roberto and Mikhail, young and scrawny with a pale fuzz on his upper lip, precocious but eager to be liked.

"Shut up, you," says Mikhail to Conrad, his face heating up. He kicks at a loose brick on the stationary pavement. But a pleasant thrill flushes under the edge of his embarrassment. "I'll take your dare, if you come too."

"What?" Roberto steps back with a nervous laugh.

"Yeah," says Conrad, his little face bright and eager.

"And you, little brother," says Mikhail. "Bold, all for one."

He feels hot breath in his ear, and Industry Avenue evaporates.

"That's more like it," says Joseph. Mikhail blinks. Joseph leaves the Hangout through the back door, and he follows.

**They move fast** through the Night District, skirting around clusters of people gathered outside the Hangout, into quieter spaces, towards the farthest side of the wall.

"You sure you're up for this?" Joseph asks. They glide in and out of pools of light cast by lamp posts overhead. Mikhail glances at him, and in the dark moments between lamps, his face becomes Roberto's.

"I'm bold, alright," he says.

"That's what we need."

"Not like that brat Conrad," Mikhail says.

They whoop and call through the night, running, running. He and Roberto are risk-takers, re-vo-lu-tion-ary. The caper they're planning will show they can bring the machines to a halt, show Amrit that Mikhail is bold.

"It'll bring the whole thing down, to a standstill," says Mikhail. He glances at his companion as they run.

He's not Roberto. A skinny guy with a fake tooth, a friend of Roberto's, maybe.

"You're drifting hard," the guy says. He looks nervous. "I'm talking about the flag. I don't know what you're talking about."

"The power station." They're running, running, almost there. "Like Roberto said. Unless he's backed out on us, where is he?"

"Hold on." Fake Tooth stops short. They've reached the western edge of the wall, and he leans against it, chest heaving for breath. "You? Are you saying that it was you and Roberto who blew up the power station?"

"It's just gonna be a caper, a bit of sabotage." Mikhail laughs. "No one is saying anything about blowing it up."

"Mikhail, people died. One guy got sent to the box." He whispers, but his lips are so close to Mikhail's face it's like a shout. Mikhail turns away, too quickly, and the ground and sky spin, change places. He lurches into the wall, grabs

hold for balance.

"It was you. I can't believe it. You, I heard about it, they sent you to the box."

Mikhail slides down the wall, rests his cheek against its cold surface and closes his eyes. The box.

"You're drifting too hard for this. We can go back." The man's voice is kindly. "Let's go back."

"Back to your childhood," the woman's voice in the loudspeaker is saying. Mikhail whimpers, crouched down with his head between his knees.

He's naked and cold, in the box. He's afraid, he can't recall how long he's been in here, but the voice is soothing.

"Your childhood. Is that where the seeds of your aberrant behavior were planted? It's not your fault. Was there a teacher, perhaps? A dorm patron?"

In the end, after the painful cold and hunger and endless interrogation, Mikhail screams the name of his nursery matron over and over, and the freezing temperature is replaced by blessed warmth. He is fed and clothed and he sleeps, soothed by voices singing softly to him over the loudspeaker. He presses his cheek to the inside of the box, sobbing, and kisses it, gratefully.

"That's sick, little man," says the man with the fake tooth. He's bent over on the pavement next to the wall, cradling Mikhail's head in his lap. A light rain is falling.

Joseph. His name is Joseph.

"You're their man now." Joseph's cheeks are wet, maybe from the rain. "They broke you and rebuilt you."

"I rebuild things," Mikhail sobs. "I can fix it, I have tools. I work."

"Of course you do."

Joseph holds him a while in his hard, gangly arms, and Mikhail slides down off the Drift like walking downhill through a fog bank and out the other side. He closes his eyes.

"Joseph?"

"Hmm?"

"What was your dare?"

A chuckle, without humor. "Forget it, little brother. You're not the dupe I took you for. Takes the fun out of it."

Mikhail looks up into Joseph's face. The man's staring away, over the wall to the imposing tower

of central administration.

"Can you see it?"

Mikhail cranes his neck up from Joseph's lap. "The flag, up on top? That was the dare?"

"Yeah. Stupid."

The two regard one another for a long moment. Joseph stands up. "I'm going to get it, for you. I'll be bold for once."

"Wait." Mikhail pulls the repair tool, his only real possession, from the pocket of his coveralls and presses it into Joseph's hand. "Take it."

With a grunt, Joseph scrambles up and over the wall, and his footfalls recede in the darkness.

A sudden silence, like he was never there. Mikhail lies in the dark, the pavement cool against his cheek, listening to the rain whisper in his ears, until he hears the curfew siren sounding: three short, one long; three short, one long.

Stumbling to his feet, he starts to walk.

The street outside the Hangout is empty and quiet, but for a trickle of rainwater moving through the gutter. A green tablet of Drift dissolves on the wet pavement, crushed by the retreating feet of fellow young people, like Amrit and Roberto, returning through the gate to the dorms. Mikhail stares at the green speck, and his eyes water.

The lights of the first patrol approach, sweeping in to collect anyone on this side of the wall after curfew. Dimly, in the distance beyond the western wall, near the flag tower, he hears shouts, and the clamor of a trespassing alarm.

Mikhail begins to run.

He runs wildly, with no real energy to sustain him. He thinks of Amrit, her teeth flashing in the dark Hangout; he sees Roberto's affable smile under dripping face paint. He thinks of Joseph climbing over the wall. Then he thinks of nothing at all, his feet pounding the pavement noisily, his arms pumping, until he sees the gate. Once through it, he sprawls on a bench where the sidewalk begins, breathless, on the right side of the wall at last.

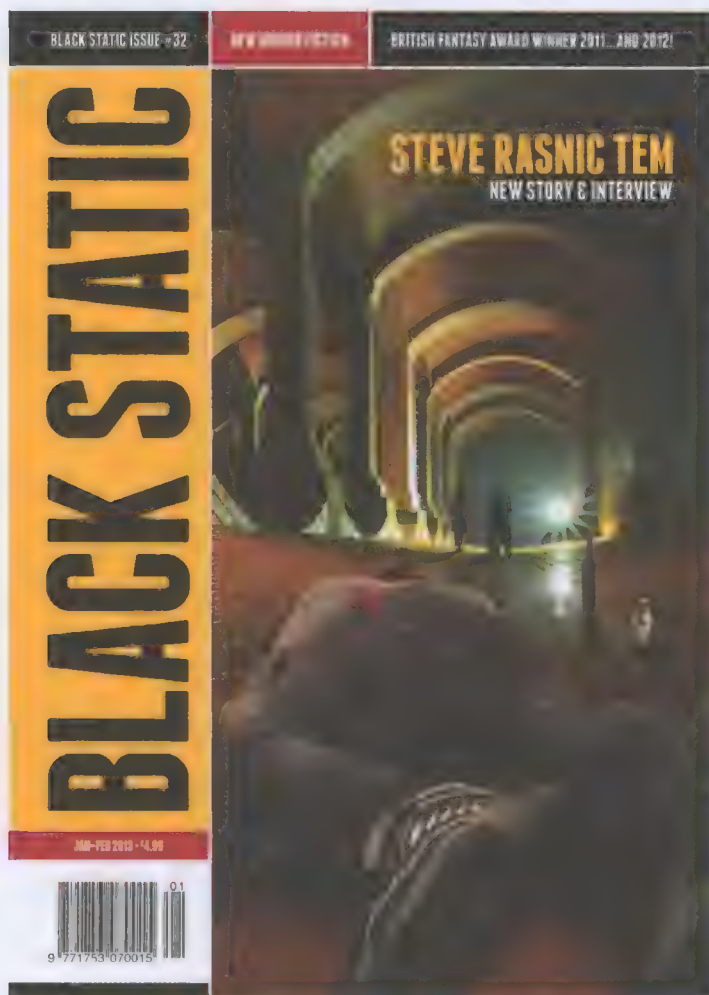
Under the bench lies a broken bird.

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Tracie Welser is a graduate of the 2010 Clarion West Writers Workshop. Her stories have been published in *Crossed Genres*, *Outlaw Bodies*, and in *Interzone* #240. Tracie blogs at [www.thisisnotanowl.com](http://www.thisisnotanowl.com).



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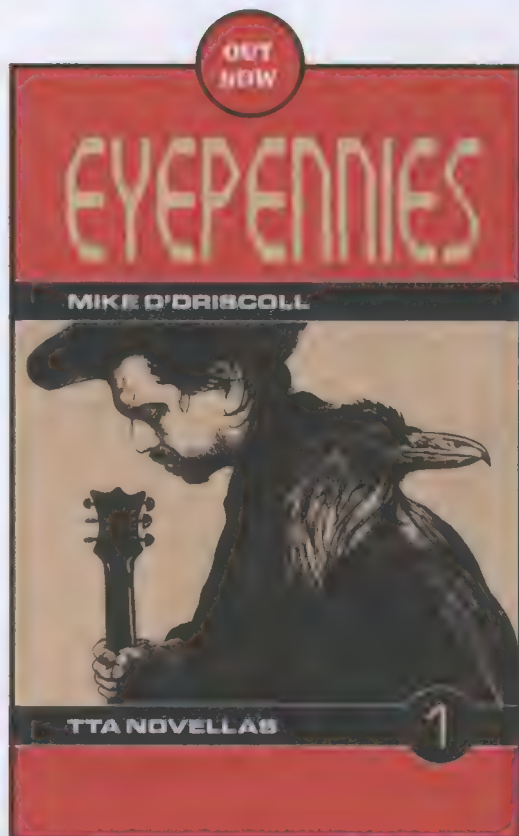
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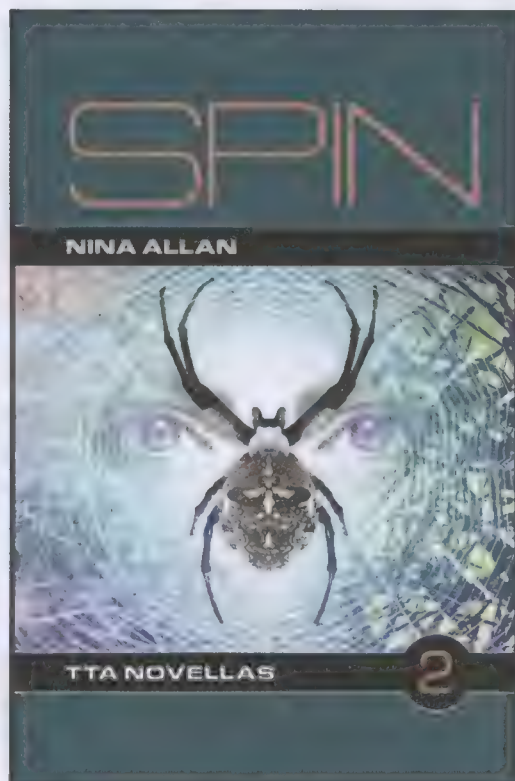
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## BOOK ZONE

### THRONE OF THE CRESCENT MOON

Saladin Ahmed  
*plus author interview*

### NEXUS

Ramez Naam

### BEDLAM

Christopher Brookmyre

### STEAMPUNK III

Edited by Ann VanderMeer

### TAKEN

Benedict Jacka

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J.T. Brannan

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Lee Battersby

### THE CREATIVE FIRE

Brenda Cooper

### JAGANNATH

Karin Tidbeck  
*plus author interview*



### THRONE OF THE CRESCENT MOON

Saladin Ahmed

Gollancz hb, 288pp, £14.99

Arabian Nights-style fantasies are not unusual in English-language literature, genre or otherwise, and the Arab world of yore has been used – perhaps less frequently than its historical impact would suggest – in a number of genre works, from Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare* to Ian Dennis' Prince of Stars trilogy. *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, however, is less *Alf Laylat wa Layla* than it is a genre sword-and-sorcery novel set in a world inspired by the Caliphates.

Dr Adoulla Makhlood is a ghul-hunter and fast approaching retirement age. His assistant, Raseed bas Raseed, is a Dervish, a sort of combat monk, devout and highly-trained in armed and unarmed combat. When the woman Adoulla loves, the brothel-keeper Mistress Miri, sends a boy to him whose parents have been killed by ghuls, Adoulla and Raseed head out of the city to the scene of the murder to investigate. There, they are attacked by ghuls an order of magnitude more powerful than any Adoulla has ever encountered before. Happily, the

duo are saved by a magical lion, which proves to be Zamia Banu Laith Badawi, a shapechanger and the protector of her Bedouin tribe. Except her tribe is no more – they have all been killed by ghuls. Zamia reluctantly agrees to accompany Adoulla and Raseed back to the city, where Adoulla must investigate the mystery of the powerful ghuls' origin. This leads him into contact with the Falcon Prince, a Robin Hood-like figure who seems set on seizing the eponymous throne for himself, and whose aims and methods Adoulla finds profoundly objectionable.

The Gollancz publicity material describes *Throne of the Crescent Moon* as “in many ways, a very traditional fantasy”, and makes much of its setting – as informed by Ahmed's background. But it is in the ways the book is not a traditional fantasy that it is most interesting. The protagonist is an old man, about to retire, and not a peasant hero with secret magical privilege. There are poor people in the book's world, and the characters spend much of their time among them. There is no romanticising of rural or urban poverty. And the book ends with the status quo very much upset.

It's not all perfect, however. Though Ahmed assembles an interesting core cast, Raseed turns more or less single-note once Zamia has made her appearance. She too feels somewhat paper-thin. The elderly magician couple of Dawoud and Litaz, however, are much better drawn, and the best written characters in the book. The writing also takes a while to settle down and a few uses of American vernacular in early chapters jar badly. Everything in the plot is there for a reason, but one or two incidents do feel a tad over-extended.

Despite all that, *Throne of the Crescent Moon* marks a promis-



# SALADIN AHMED

REVIEWED AND INTERVIEWED BY IAN SALES



ing debut. As twenty-first century fantasy novels go, it is a remarkably light book, weighing in at a mere 288 pages. It is a fast read, despite the plot feeling more like a series of arabesques than the straight line more typical of genre fantasies. The world of the story feels both Arabic and yet, perhaps, not quite Arabic enough. There is a definitely a *Thief of Baghdad* atmosphere throughout, and some of Ahmed's choices were clearly informed by his background – but *Throne of the Crescent Moon* is an Arabic fantasy in much the same

way typical Anglophone genre fantasy novels are loosely-derived from the Middle Ages in Europe.

But it's not the world of *Throne of the Crescent Moon* that is its most interesting aspect, or indeed its Unique Selling Point. But using that world has allowed Ahmed to question some of the tropes that are deeply embedded, and usually deployed without thought, in genre fantasy. As a result, I suspect the Crescent Moon Kingdoms series may prove to be a more impressive work than any individual volume within it.

The Gollancz publicity material makes a point of mentioning your heritage and that *Throne of the Crescent Moon* draws heavily upon it. What elements of your background fed into your writing; and was this a deliberate choice or something that just happened?

Absolutely deliberate. I understand the appeal of the notion of literature as a self-contained field – the idea that talking about a writer's biography or demographic profile is somehow getting "outside the work". But every book ever written is, to a degree, a product of the cultural forces that surround the author. I was raised in a mostly Arab, mostly Muslim immigrant community. The sound of the call to prayer, the smells of certain breads – these are a part of who I am.

This doesn't mean I subscribe to a doctrinaire notion of authenticity, though. Howard Andrew Jones and the late George Alec Effinger – two white guys from the American Midwest – have written fantastic, convincing Arab/Muslim SF/F series. These things are rarely a straight line.

**Did you feel a temptation to make those cultural forces more overt in *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, to weigh the scales in favour of "Arab" rather than "western epic fantasy"? Do you feel some kind of balancing act is required? Or was the process more unconscious than conscious?**

There's certainly a balancing act going on. On the one hand, the novel tries to value things epic fantasy often fails to value: home,

age, piety, the poor. On the other hand, it's very solidly in the tradition of western adventure fantasy (though perhaps more sword and sorcery than epic fantasy). I guess I'd say the process itself is organic but conscious.

**What differences – if any – do you feel exist between genre fantasy and literary fantasies, and what position do you see Arab fantasies such as *Throne of the Crescent Moon* occupying?**

That's an essay rather than a quick answer, of course. The short version is that they operate vis-à-vis different sets of conventions. And *Throne of the Crescent Moon's* set of conventions is absolutely inherited from the genre end of things. The magic often reeks of taxonomy. There is – horror of horrors! – a map of the Crescent Moon Kingdoms included. The novel was, in other words, written gleefully to the beat of M. John Harrison's "great clomping foot of nerdism". I suppose it goes without saying that I find the idea that such attention to world-building necessarily results in a bad – or fascistic! – novel to be, well, horseshit.

**There are very few Arab science fiction writers, and fewer still translated into English. Yet, Arabian Nights-style fantasies are not unknown in the English-speaking world. Given this, why did you choose to write fantasy rather than SF?**

I think much of the interest in the Arabian Nights comes from more "literary" (I know, I know) writers, who latch onto either the story-within-story structure or Scheherazade as a symbol of the unrelenting demands of story. I like John Barth and all, but these writers tend to reduce the Arabian Nights to a prism through which western literature can navel gaze. I'm much more interested in the half-historical, half-mythical land-

scape of the Arabian Nights as a landscape, if that makes sense.

And it was always going to be fantasy, as opposed to science fiction for me. I'm a (profoundly heterodox) theist. At my core, I'm a magical thinker. But also my training as a reader is very much in fantasy. My fantasy/science fiction reading ratio is probably ten to one.

**Adoulla is an old man, close to retirement. Why choose such an aged character as the hero of *Throne of the Crescent Moon*?**

Because I've always been a cranky old man at heart. Because the teenager's journey to self-discovery – which is at the centre of so many adventure fantasy novels – holds very little interest to me as a man nearing forty. But the question of how we find peace after our bodies and souls have had some

ing figure. Does Arabic history boast Robin Hood-like figures, given that charity begins at the mosque?

I'd guess nearly every culture in the world has both trickster heroes, and every region's history has populist uprisings. But the Falcon Prince is fairly Western – fairly Hollywood, even – in his genealogy. Quite a lot of Errol Flynn's Robin Hood and Douglas Fairbanks' Thief of Baghdad is in there... In general, *Throne of the Crescent Moon* does a fair amount of balancing that sort of problematic twentieth century Orientalist culture with more "authentic" (wince) influences. Harryhausen was a big influence on my monsters, for instance.

**God is referenced frequently in dialogue throughout *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, but no one**

“

**I was raised in a mostly Arab, mostly Muslim immigrant**

**community. The sound of the call to prayer, the smells of certain breads – these are a part of who I am**

heavy, hard mileage put on them? That interests me greatly.

**Settled married couples are also an odd choice as protagonists for a fantasy novel – did they come out of earlier decisions you made about the book you were writing, or did they grow out of the writing?**

I knew I wanted to have characters from the Soo Republic (the Crescent Moon Kingdoms' rough Africa analogue) appear in Book 1. But Dawoud and Litaz really emerged as part of a dynamic. As I wrote Adoulla into existence, it became clear that old friends were a big part of what was important to him. The idea of a friendship with a couple kind of spun organically from there.

**The Falcon Prince is an interest-**

**in the book actually performs an act of worship. Was this deliberate, and if so, why?**

The religion in the Crescent Moon Kingdoms – while obviously modelled in large part on medieval Islam – is tinged by an almost Protestant notion of man's private relationship with God. So I guess I'd argue that the book is full of moments of worship – but that these manifest as silent prayers and spoken commonplaces rather than as public ritual.

**Most fantasies end with the status quo re-established, yet *Throne of the Crescent Moon* ends with a regime change. Was this a dig at the consolatory nature of much fantasy?**

Yes! The "restoration of the rightful heir" plot that drives so much fantasy depends heavily on a tacit



celebration of hereditary, monarchical power. I wanted to at least touch on questions of what "rightful rule" even means.

**Given Islam's troubled history on the question of "rightful heirs" – the Shi'ites, the word Caliph itself also meaning "deputy" – do you see this topic as an antidote to typical Western fantasies or something intrinsic to an Arabic fantasy?**

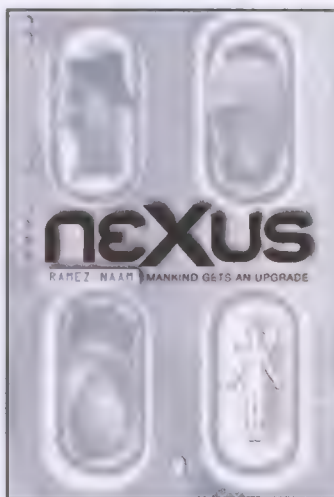
The whole novel was written with a sceptical eye toward political power, so in that sense it was an antidote to the prevailing mode of fantasy novel. I don't think the Islamic world's history on this front is any more troubled than the Christian world's, but notions of hereditary power and divine right to rule are perhaps less entrenched in the former. So there's a kind of ripe potential for fluidity there.

**Your central characters are far from the typical privileged fantasy heroes (even Peasant Heroes usually turn out to have secretly had privilege all along). Was this also deliberate?**

It was absolutely deliberate. In part due to my own class background, the socially marginalised working wizard strikes me as a much more interesting and under-explored figure than the wronged royal whelp or the Farmboy Who Is So Much More.

***Throne of the Crescent Moon* ends quite decisively. What's next for the series?**

Romances rifted and repaired. The first appearance of the djinn – also called the fireborn, or the Thousand and One. Answers to bloody questions about revolution and rulership. Glimpses of Rughal-ba, the Soo Republic, and the Warlands. The obligatory Battle of the Big Ole Fantasy Armies, which is also a Crusades analogue and a meditation on pacifism.



## NEXUS

**Ramez Naam**

Angry Robot pb, 448pp, £8.99

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**Matthew S. Dent**

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Hard SF is an interesting concept for me as a reviewer. It revels in being highly technical, and garners further esteem from being accurate. It's an effect doubled with near-future SF, given that it's more deeply grounded in present day ideas and technologies.

So it falls to me to say that I know precious little about the details, the nitty-gritties of nanotechnology, upon which *Nexus* is largely predicated. But it seems that Ramez Naam does, being a professional heavily involved in the technology, as well as the ethics surrounding it. So it's safe to say that he knows what he's talking about.

*Nexus* shows us a world where a drug can link human minds together, where bodies and minds can be improved beyond their physical constraints, and where the primary concern of law enforcement is stopping people exceeding the limitations of humanity. It takes the reader on a wild ride halfway around the world, with both practical and moral ramifications taking centre stage.

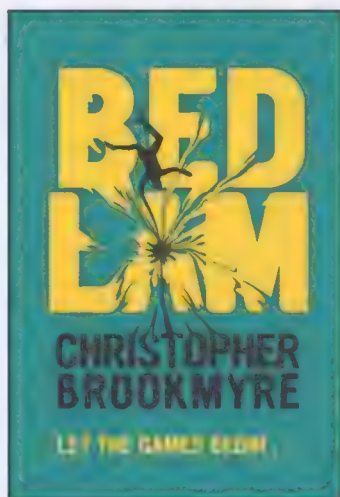
Of course, knowing the subject matter does not necessarily make someone a good writer, and at times the prose is rather stilted and perfunctory. It won't be winning any awards for poetic storytelling, but in the almost unceasing fury of the plot progression this fades almost to insignificance.

And considering that blistering pace, he pulls off quite a lot of characterisation. The background characters remain little more than pieces on a chessboard, but he manages to inject real life and likability into the three leads. Mostly this takes place in the breathing moments before the action sequences.

So I enjoyed *Nexus*. Naam explains the technology surprisingly well and the premise feels, at times, all too believable. I think that's kind of the point. The somewhat dystopian vision of a future where scientific research into post-humanism is limited seems all the more chilling when you can draw parallels to present day restrictions and debates around potentially life-saving stem cell research.

At times, though, the plot becomes simply a vessel for the debate Naam clearly wants to promote, but I'd be lying if I said it got in the way of my enjoyment. The epilogue is a perfect example of this – it isn't strictly necessary, and feels a little out of place as part of the story, but I understand its purpose.

Overall, *Nexus* is a very readable book. It deals with real world ramifications of next-generation technology in a believable, if somewhat scary, fashion. It's accurate without being boring, and action-packed without descending into the trite or vapid. There is a dictionary full of reviewer clichés mandated for this kind of situation, but actually I think I'm just going to say that *Nexus* was rather good, and you should read it.



### BEDLAM

**Christopher Brookmyre**

Orbit hb, 376pp, £17.99

**Paul F. Cockburn**

Writing for *The Guardian* in May 2011, Iain M. Banks focused on the not-infrequent phenomenon of non-SF writers being “drawn to write what is perfectly obviously science fiction – regardless of either their own protestations or those of their publishers”. Banks welcomed their potential for engendering “further dialogue” between genres. Nevertheless, he underlined the necessity for authors to do their homework: “as with most subjects, if you’re going to enter the dialogue it does help to know at least a little of what you’re talking about, and it also helps, by implication, not to dismiss everything that’s gone before as not worth bothering with”.

Of course, Banks can claim a fairly unique perspective on this issue. We rightfully think of him as “one of us”, thanks to a quarter-century of ground-breaking science fiction novels. Yet it’s easy to forget that, when *Consider Phlebas* was first published in 1987, Banks was generally viewed as a promising young literary author, albeit with a taste for the surreal, who

already had three successful novels under his belt. He had to prove he had something new to say.

Fellow Scottish author Christopher Brookmyre joins the ongoing science fiction “dialogue” with significantly more baggage; notwithstanding *Pandaemonium*, which pitted a group of teenagers against the forces of Hell, Brookmyre is primarily known for delivering action-packed, darkly humorous and often quite violent crime novels. While his two most recent Glasgow-based novels were deemed more “serious” examples of crime fiction – inspiring the publisher to rebrand him as Chris Brookmyre – it is interesting to note that *Bedlam* is listed alongside the more in-your-face novels that cemented his reputation.

This is appropriate enough; the gritty humour and energetic prose which helped Brookmyre stand out from the Tartan Noir crowd is certainly here: we’re shown nanite clouds that gust through ventilation systems “with missionary enthusiasm, like a sentient fart determined to be smelled”. A character is dismissed as “the cyborg equivalent of a Nissan Micra”, just one of a host of late 20th/early 21st century cultural references that successfully define its main character, a disillusioned scientist and computer game player called Ross Baker. Given his background, it’s entirely appropriate that many of the references are themselves from works of science fiction; for example, when Ross realises that an old friend has betrayed him, his response is: “You went Lando on us?” (As in Lando Calrissian, from *The Empire Strikes Back*.)

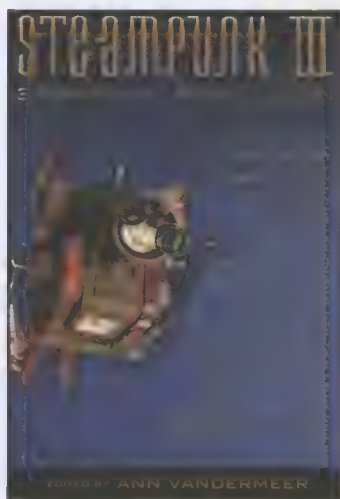
Present too is Brookmyre’s trademark focus on an anti-authoritarian character, someone trying their best to survive the repercussions of the machinations of “the establishment”. However, on this occasion, this theme is mostly contained within a discon-

nected timeline which is featured intermittently through the novel. As a result, the book as a whole seems somewhat skewed. At times, there’s a sense that Brookmyre is simply having too much fun imagining what it would really be like to live and fight within some of his all-time favourite computer games.

At its heart, *Bedlam* is about world-building; how we each create worlds from our own perceptions and perspectives, and the fascination in working out what those worlds say about us – especially the ones we create or enjoy in order to “escape” from our own lives. In terms of style and subject matter, Brookmyre certainly brings something fresh to Banks’ science fiction dialogue. Yet, by focusing so much on the games’ shoot-em-up formats, and on the increasingly complex machinations of the neo-fascist Integrity (which wishes to stop all transfers between different game worlds, and is quite prepared to torture and destroy in order to achieve their goal), does Brookmyre miss a real trick?

For a few pages we’re shown a truly horrifying world, a small idealised English village created for people who “don’t feel right unless they’ve got something to be afraid of and somebody to look down on”. It’s a world where unreal, unruly teenagers are flogged; where virtual illegal immigrants are constantly rounded up and deported, or executed. Essentially, it’s a world for *Daily Mail* readers. “These ass-wipes would rather live in a world where criminals are caught and punished than a world in which there is no crime”, we’re told. “Except, of course, there is no crime; only an illusion of it and it’s an illusion they find bizarrely comforting”. It’s arguable that Brookmyre would have given science fiction some more social relevance if his hero had ended up in the *Daily Mail* world, rather than a retro 1990s vision of the future.





### STEAMPUNK III: STEAMPUNK REVOLUTION

Edited by Ann VanderMeer

Tachyon pb, 432pp, £13.50

**Simon Marshall Jones**

Mention the word “steampunk”, and inevitably images come to mind of airships floating effortlessly through skies filled with gleaming spires, vast iron machines belching smoke that fills the air from horizon to horizon, and corseted Victorian ladies, along with pith-helmeted and monocled gentlemen, replete with handlebar moustaches, striding confidently across both the known and unknown worlds in search of adventure and mysterious artefacts, or battling dastardly villains going about their nefarious deeds.

For the most part, this has stood as a handy definition of the genre but, as *Steampunk III: Steampunk Revolution* shows deftly and plainly, such constraints and tropes exist simply to be stretched, broken, and remade by those pioneers unwilling to tread the path forged by others. The tapestry from which this collection of twenty-six stories and four essays has been lifted is vast in both breadth and depth, and can indeed be considered a revolution. Some

would say that many of the tales included merely skirt the very borders of what has come to be recognised as the “correct” interpretation of steampunk, a point well made in Amal El-Mohtar’s essay ‘Winding Down the House: Toward a Steampunk Without Steam’, essential reading if one is to properly deconstruct and contextualise what constitutes the genre in order to move on from there.

And therein lies this book’s problem, from a reviewer’s perspective at least; it is not one of either lack of context, subtext or variety, but instead the sheer embarrassing wealth of thematic riches, all written with equal brilliance and facility. The difficulty in such a short review is highlighting the most apposite exemplars out of so many. Just like the best science fiction, steampunk expresses ideas and concepts that go beyond mere storytelling: the potential of human destiny; the different shapes history could have taken; how people interface with the technology and its consequences, confronting both its marvels and its threats. In its broadest sense, steampunk is about failures as well as breakthroughs, with abject disasters and soaring successes both personal and global. With every story here, boundaries have been pushed and they’re not just testament to the inventive imagination of the writers, but also to the breadth of the human mind in conjuring and sculpting visions that might, if the Victorian era had gone in another direction, have come to pass.

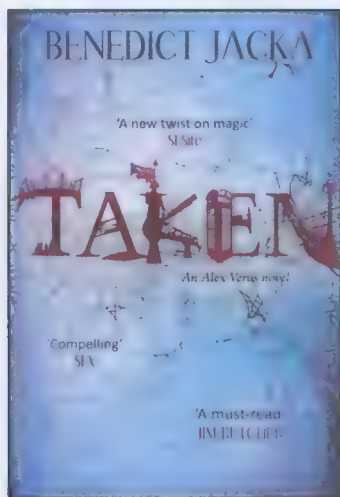
The whole panoply of human experience and endeavour is here: high adventure, the exotic, royalty, love, disappointment, sadness, elation, medical marvels, deep friendships, overcoming the odds, global collapses. Lands the length and breadth of Empire and beyond, peopled with revolutionary agitators, villains, princesses

in disguise, assassins, inventors, aviatrixes, circuses, surgeons, and captains of the air. Beneath all the wonder is something else, however: a harsh reality and unpalatable truths.

This collection is not afraid to push through the nominal boundaries and venture into a kind of no-man’s-land where the connection to the genre is tenuous. It starts off with the very epitome of steampunk, Carrie Vaughan’s ‘Harry and Marlowe and the Talisman of the Cult of Egil’, and then veers off into uncharted areas such as Jeff VanderMeer’s ‘Fixing Hanover’, or Ben Peek’s ‘Possession’, where the steampunk itself provides only the most distant of backdrops.

‘A Handful of Rice’ by Vandana Singh could be said to go even further – it eschews the familiar setting of Victorian England and transplants it to the Indian Subcontinent. The central pivot of the story is the friction between the old and the new, between pranic energy and steam-power, yet the latter is only incidental to the story itself but nevertheless essential to the telling. Bruce Sterling contributes ‘White Fungus’, set in 2040s Europe amidst a global collapse. Its crumbling cyberpunk aesthetic (which is, if you think about it, the logical conclusion of steampunk) signals a harsh critique of systems reliant on technology, whether those systems are home computers or large political bodies. It seems to be saying “what about people?” Curiously, the story inverts the focus of hope, from shiny technology to post-steampunk human invention and resourcefulness.

It is impossible to encapsulate the full spectrum of instantiations of the genre as contained in this anthology. It is by turns astonishing and audacious, emphasising just how wide the spectrum of steampunk can be. Absolutely essential reading for students of the genre.



### TAKEN

**Benedict Jacka**

Orbit pb, 319pp, £7.99

#### Juliet E. McKenna

Having enjoyed Jacka's first two books, I opened *Taken* with mingled anticipation and apprehension. Book three is often when prior knowledge of character and scenario becomes essential. That, or painstaking recapping sees the opening flow like cold treacle. Encouragingly, neither applies.

Alex Verus, low-level divination mage, sits in a Starbucks waiting to meet an unknown but very powerful mage woman. As Crystal offers him a job, and he turns it down, Jacka swiftly and deftly portrays the essentials of Alex's character and grounds his story in contemporary London while simultaneously revealing the perilous parallel world of rival mages of Light and Dark. A new reader should have no problem picking up the series here while fans of *Fated* and *Cursed* learn new facets of Alex's life. So far, so good.

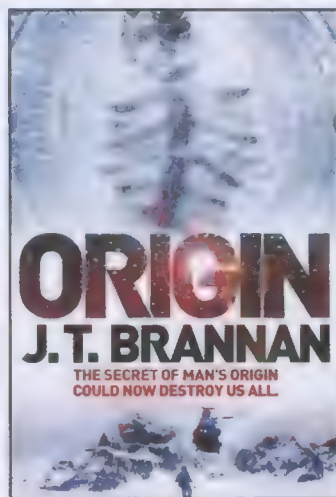
Alex turns down Crystal's offer because he has other responsibilities, notably training his apprentice Luna. Their relationship is now firmly master and pupil and it's good to see Jacka avoiding the

urban-fantasy-soap-opera pitfall. Luna's currently taking classes in magical duelling. So far, so Harry Potter? Third books often see a new writer's imagination running out of steam and resorting to imitation. Not so here. Jacka draws on broader traditions of magicians' apprentices to expand his magical world. That said, I don't think Potteresque echoes are accidental, but an indication that readers and characters alike shouldn't leap to assumptions as this story unfolds.

Next, Talisid wants Alex's help and turning down a request from a high level Council member isn't easy. Not that Alex wants to. Apprentices are disappearing. If Dark mages are recruiting by abduction, this is serious. Even more so if some Light mage is letting information slip as to where vulnerable apprentices might be found, by accident or design. As in the earlier books, 'Light' and 'Good' are by no means synonymous. Light prejudice against magical creatures, the less magically powerful and particularly the non-magical world becomes apparent and ultimately significant. Meantime, Dark mages mercilessly pursue ambitions and grudges alike.

Events take a deadly turn as Alex follows a promising lead into an unexpected hail of gunfire. Getting out of that isn't easy, even if Alex can read the future. Jacka's continued inventiveness with spellcraft is a continuing strength of these books. Magic's full potential relies on its intelligent use as well as an understanding of its limits. Though that's just the beginning of Alex's challenges. Some mages would prefer to do away with all such limitations. A low-level diviner and a few apprentices can't battle them.

This finely crafted story is a solidly satisfying read. *Taken* sees Jacka established as a writer with a distinctive voice within the best traditions of contemporary urban fantasy.



### ORIGIN

**J.T. Brannan**

Headline pb, 400pp, £7.99

#### Ian Hunter

For the world's self-proclaimed most reluctant reader, *Origin* appears on the surface to be the perfect book. Split into five parts and seventy-two chapters, this has all the hallmarks of a short chapter page-turner. But is it? Well, we are in Dan Brown-ish territory, I suppose, and before the supermarket shelves became dominated by paperbacks with black or grey covers and a photograph of maybe a mask or a glove or a chain, then *Origin* would have been right up there on the shelves beside books with three words in the title, with one of them being *Nosferatu*, or *Lucifer*, or *Doomsday*, or *Templar*. You get the picture.

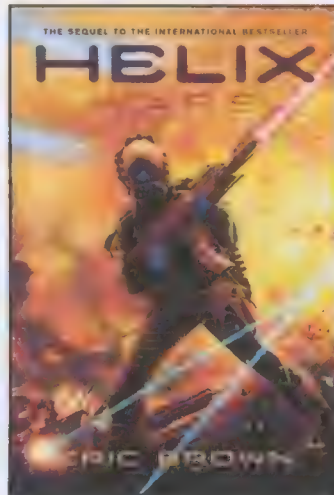
First-time author (and former army officer) Brennan knows how to spin a yarn at breakneck speed, and the military antics have more than a ring of authenticity to them. The action opens down in the Antarctic on Pine Island Glacier, where a member of an expedition lets his curiosity get the better of him and falls to what might be his death. His team follows to the rescue and find what he has



just discovered, which is a mummified body with "anomalous artefacts" as they say in the trade. Something that couldn't possibly be, but is, and no sooner does the expedition reveal that they have discovered something "anomalous" than shadowy powers, listening in via satellite, quickly join up the dots and wipe out our band of intrepid explorers. Apart from team leader Lynn Edwards who has nowhere to turn except into the waiting arms of ex-husband Matt Adams who, handily, was once a member of a crack government unit. Their relationship brings to mind Andy McDermott's series of books featuring Nina Child and Eddie Chase.

What follows is the mother of all conspiracy theories as well as some minor ones, such as the mysterious, possibly all-powerful Bilderberg Group; theories about the missing link between man and ape; the remote Area 51 in the Nevada desert; the Nazca Lines in Peru; and a certain Hadron Collider in Geneva. To be sure, *Origin* isn't subtle; there is a tad too much conspiracy theory dumping, a kitchen sink approach to piling this "otherness" into the mix, and some fast switching between multiple viewpoints of different characters, regardless of their importance to the plot.

My advice? Don't look down, keep your eyes straight ahead, and your knuckles white by holding tightly to the covers of the book until the end. *Origin* isn't great, but it isn't bad either. There is maybe too much going on and the reader's incredulity will be stretched with regard to the characterisation, some of the action, and parts of the plot, but it does what it says on the tin by providing a few hours of over-the-top entertainment perfect for the beach, the pool, or before the lights go out, and it ends in a cliffhanger that just cries out for a sequel.



### HELIX WARS

**Eric Brown**

Solaris pb, 383pp, £7.99

#### Lawrence Osborn

*Helix Wars* is the sequel to the 2007 novel *Helix*, which described the arrival of humans on the Helix, a vast artificial environment created by a race of benevolent aliens known as the Builders as a refuge for intelligent races that have been threatened by extinction on their home worlds. The new story is set some 200 years later. Humans are now well-established on the Helix and have been appointed by the Builders to the largely diplomatic role of peacekeeping.

The central character, Jeff Ellis, is a shuttle pilot who regularly transports peacekeepers to other worlds of the Helix. However, on this occasion, his shuttle crashes on Phandra (a world occupied by tiny empathetic humanoids), killing his passengers and leaving Jeff himself seriously injured.

He is rescued by some Phandrans and restored to health by Calla, a Phandran healer. It transpires that he was shot down by the Sporelli, an aggressive authoritarian race who have invaded Phandra in order to gain access to the natural resources on another

world further along the Helix. As soon as he is well enough, Jeff sets out with Calla to get news of this invasion back to the peacekeepers on New Earth. However, the Sporelli pursue and capture them.

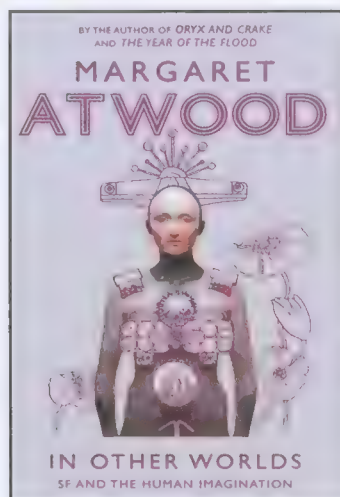
Fortunately for Jeff his crash has come to the attention of Kranda, a member of the warlike Mahkani (the Helix's engineers), whose life he once saved. Because of their code of honour, she is now bound to rescue him and duly does so with the aid of some highly advanced Builder technology. Jeff then insists on rescuing Calla and in the process they save the Helix from an alien invasion.

Interwoven into this is a secondary story about Jeff's marital difficulties. Since the death of their son he and his wife Maria have grown apart, and Jeff, based on advice from Calla, clumsily seeks reconciliation. After some spectacular twists the two storylines merge, Jeff is made an offer he can't refuse by the Builders, and they all live happily ever after.

The novel is driven by the well-paced action of the main storyline, while the secondary storyline adds depth to Jeff. However, most of the minor characters, particularly the aliens, are little more than two-dimensional stereotypes.

By contrast, Brown's description of alien technologies is very imaginative. The wind-powered mass transport system on Phandra is refreshingly novel, while the technology underlying the Helix itself is mind-blowing. Unfortunately he allows the technology to become a *deus ex machina* by providing Jeff and Kranda with nearly invulnerable Builder-designed exoskeletons that all too easily enable them to overcome the challenges that face them.

In spite of my reservations, I enjoyed *Helix Wars*. It may not be Eric Brown at his best, but it is still imaginative, well-paced and easy to read.



## IN OTHER WORLDS

**Margaret Atwood**

Virago pb, 272pp, £9.99

### Barbara Melville

Margaret Atwood messes with me. Sometimes, as with *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, this is a positive experience, taking me on unexpected journeys, and making me think in different ways. For me, this knack of uprooting people's thinking is pivotal to good science fiction. But despite penning these tales, all frequently considered science fiction, Atwood insists she's been miscategorised. Over the years, she's been challenged and even chastised for saying so. This collection offers a riposte of sorts, whilst exploring and celebrating her personal relationship with the fantastic.

In the book's earlier essays, Atwood charts two histories: her own, from childhood to adulthood, and that of science fiction. The book's later essays explore and review specific other worlds, including H. Rider Haggard's *She*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. While each essay is taut and engaging, the book's overall structure is difficult. The open-

ing essays are the most powerful, rich in strong ideas and skilfully bonded through memoir. The later essays are just as riveting but not as personal, making them harder to get into.

Despite the clunking mechanics of this setup, these essays share a common thread: the concept of other worlds. Such worlds, Atwood tells us, may be physical, conceptual or temporal: alternate realities, other planets or unwritten futures, to name a few. They may be utopias, dystopias, or both – what she terms “ustopias”. What these worlds have in common is their mapping of unknowns.

Atwood's personal account includes a world borne of her childhood mind's creation – Mischiefeland – comprising superheroes of the flying rabbit persuasion. She considers Mischiefeland and others like it as descendants of the earliest storytelling, and explores why they manifest in the human psyche. The superhero's power of flying, as a means of transcending the body's material limits, is one such example. Atwood notes the winged creatures in myths tend to be tricksters, and their stories warnings. This lust for ideals – and the question of whether or not to trust them – is an integral theme in this collection.

But as beautiful as these essays are, they're let down by her defence of her definitions. She notes the following distinctions between “science fiction” and “speculative fiction”: “What I mean by ‘science fiction’ is those books that descend from HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters – things that could not possibly happen – whereas, for me, ‘speculative fiction’ means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such – things that really could happen but just hadn't completely

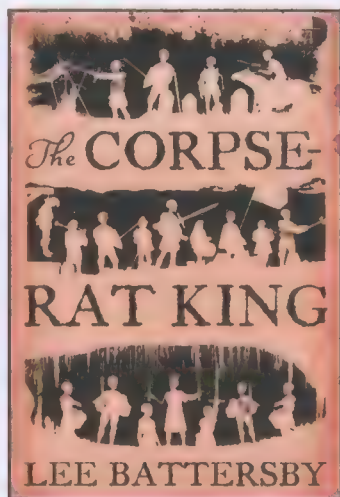
happened when the authors wrote the books. I would place my own books in this second category: no Martians.”

This is interesting on the face of it, but couldn't it be argued that Wells' world seemed feasible at the time of writing? Journeying to the centre of the Earth isn't possible now – did it seem any more likely in Verne's time? Either way, while I recognise what she's getting at, her distinctions seem arbitrary. Let's face it: this road doesn't get any less wearisome the more people travel along it. Most genre-related definitions are woolly and problematic, and as far as I can tell, this one adds nothing useful.

When reading the second half of the book – where we're definitely not in Mischiefeland anymore – I wondered if Atwood's discomfort with the term science fiction is derived from a discomfort with science. Atwood doesn't attack science per se, but within the bounds of this collection, her references to science are cynical. This makes me ask, what about the wonder? Why not mention that? The lack of such is evident in her rave review of Bill McKibben's *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*, a nonfiction polemic challenging transhumanism. Atwood ends the piece with the caution, “Perhaps we should leave well enough alone”. Really? These quests for utopia, and indeed human perfection, might well be disturbing – but perhaps we could try to understand them?

I'm not convinced Atwood's essays clarify her position on science fiction at all. For me, they bring further obfuscation, with her troublesome categorisations joining another world – that pesky parallel universe containing malfunctioning definitions of genre. But I've no doubt Atwood can pen a great journey: even her more difficult writings are laced with wit and elegance. I only wish I'd been able to stay in Mischiefeland a little longer.





### THE CORPSE-RAT KING

Lee Battersby

Angry Robot pb, 416pp, £7.99

**Maureen Kincaid Speller**

In September 2012, Lavie Tidhar identified an apparent new trend in fantastic writing, which he dubbed “slacker fantasy”, distinguished by the narrative’s “reluctance of agency”, that is its lack of conflict, and by sympathetic but passive characters. His exemplar was David Tallerman’s *Giant Thief* (Angry Robot), in which Easie Damasco spent most of his time trying to disengage himself from whatever action was going on. In his review Tidhar nailed precisely what it was that had irritated me about the novel: I also dislike contemporary slacker fiction but hadn’t made the connection.

Lee Battersby’s *The Corpse-Rat King* seems to stray into similar territory. It is true that Marius dos Hellespont has rather grander aspirations than Damasco, and indeed comes from a wealthier background. It is true also that Hellespont is much more knowledgeable and competent than Damasco, though disinclined to put his skills to earning a more conventional living. However, while the reader might see Hel-

lespont as being down on his luck – and it is difficult to imagine sinking much lower than prowling battlefields, looting from corpses – he would doubtless explain that he was taking advantage of a good business opportunity. Whatever else happens, Hellespont knows how to tell a good story, as well given that the novel relies on the reader being more interested in the story than in the plot.

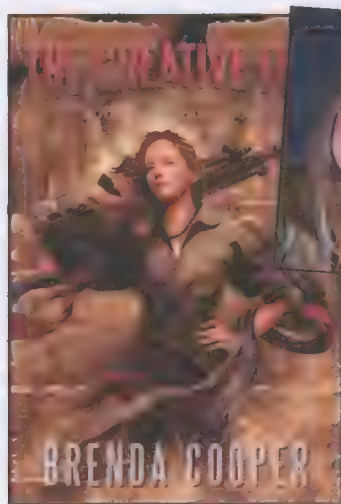
Except that the plot itself is potentially fascinating. Hellespont has just robbed the late king of Scorby when he suddenly finds himself down among the dead, who have mistaken him for the king and wish him to rule over them. When the error is realised, the dead insist that Hellespont find them a new king. He determines that his replacement should be Tanspar, the late king, not least because this will necessitate his returning to Scorby to find and crown the body, and in doing this, Hellespont has some notion of being able to escape. However, the dead, as they point out, can reach him anywhere, and send Gerd, Hellespont’s dead apprentice, to accompany him. Furthermore, Hellespont has been mysteriously transformed into something that looks dead but isn’t quite, though one begins to suspect this is a condition conferred for later authorial convenience, given the way that it rarely seems to trouble Hellespont.

One might suppose that Hellespont would be off like a shot, to crown the new King of the Dead as soon as possible. Instead, having shed Gerd, Hellespont meanders homeward in a picaresque fashion, stopping off here and there to undergo set-piece adventures, in which the reader learns more and more about the real Marius dos Hellespont and the omniscient narrator opines about this and that in a way that is at times slightly too reminiscent of an overly well-lunched elderly buffer down the

pub. They’re very good set-piece adventures but more than once I found myself checking the pagination, wondering how long it would be before the story began to focus on the important stuff. It’s halfway through the novel before Hellespont seems to remember he has a job to get on with, after which the narrative kicks into impressively high gear.

And that, perhaps, is the real problem with this novel. A good half of it is scene-setting, throat-clearing, procrastinatory narrative. There is little doubt that one way or another Hellespont will achieve his aim, simply because he is that kind of character, and this is not the kind of novel that challenges one’s expectation of “that kind of character”. One could perhaps see the picaresque element as providing a tour round Hellespont’s interior life, explicating his motives, showing how he became the person he is today, and crucially suggesting that he does bad things for good reasons, so making him morally acceptable. One could, but quite apart from the fact that one suspects Hellespont would as a matter of course have several layers of cover story, it would overdignify the fact that the author, for whatever reason, simply isn’t getting down to telling the story itself.

Which is a pity as the plot is ultimately much more compelling than the character. We are clearly intended to love Hellespont but often, while he was larking about above ground, I wondered how the dead felt, waiting for him to bring them their king, knowing that he was procrastinating. We are invited to sympathise with Hellespont’s predicament yet he has brought it on himself, while the dead, like all his other victims, are being cheated. Which is funny if you like that slacker vibe. If you don’t, you’re left with an affable but baggy novel which could be so much more if it would just shape up.



### THE CREATIVE FIRE

**Brenda Cooper**

Pyr hb, 353pp, £15.99

**Jim Steel**

Sometimes an author can be too honest. One of the first things that the reader hits is the author's note which states that this duology is based on the musical *Evita* – which, in itself, is enough to have many potential readers heading for the hills regardless of whether or not they've actually seen any of the screen or stage adaptations. Prejudice can be a terrible thing. Yes, the protagonist is a talented if unschooled singer. Yes, her trajectory is somewhat obvious. But no one can predict the shape of a tree by looking at the seed.

Subtitled *Book One of Ruby's Song*, this novel opens on a generation starship. Ruby is a teenage girl who is one of the grays – the working class – in this rigidly-structured society. Life is decidedly dystopian for them. The reds oppress the grays, and the upper-caste blues are rarely – if ever – seen in this stratified society. It's also a patriarchal society, which makes Ruby's position in it even worse. One of her friends, arguably a borderline prostitute, is brutally raped and murdered



by reds early in the novel. We're clearly not in jazz-hands territory here.

A serious accident at the start literally mixes the classes before the status quo is restored, bringing Ruby into contact

with one of the blues. She saves his life and blatantly offers herself to him, but at this time her only ambition is for an easier life and to become a singer. However, her strength and ambition are obvious from the start and it is clear that she is a complex and rounded person, and she not merely a vessel for the transportation of the plot.

The setting, like the ship itself, is, however, slightly creakier. The starship is nearing the end of its journey and is starting to fall apart. The social set-up is obviously something that has (de) evolved from the origin plan, but it is still recognisable to the people within. Aldiss' *Non-Stop* this is not. However, water has to be carefully managed, which suggests that either the closed-cycle system is inefficient or that the author is manufacturing hardships for the grays. They drink out of bulbs, objects which are only needed in zero-gravity environments. Using them in the artificial gravity of the ship is pointless – they would be much harder to clean than cups and would probably present a health risk. There are other curious customs. How easy can it be to bury someone in space when the artificial gravity pulls objects towards the centre of the ship? Cooper's slick prose pulls the reader over these bumps, but they are still there.

But space opera should never be confused with hard SF. Its truths should be found within its characters and, when looked at from that angle, Cooper has produced a fine novel.



### JAGANNATH

**Karin Tidbeck**

Cheeky Frawg Books pb, 160pp, £9.99

Karin Tidbeck is a Swedish writer who, frustrated by a lack of local opportunities, began a few years ago to translate her own work into English, leading to appearances in *Weird Tales* and other US magazines. A previous Swedish collection – *Vem är Arvid Pekon?* – included all but four of these fourteen stories, but this is her first book in English. There are many points of similarity here with Ekaterina Sedya's similarly strong new collection, *Moscow But Dreaming*. Both write stories set in parts of the world and featuring legends and character types not yet reduced to cliché by English and American writers, stories that can be rather miserable, about ground-down people and the difficulty of finding love and support in a heartless world; both are part of a tradition of fantasy that takes in Kafka but sidesteps Tolkien.

While *Moscow But Dreaming* tends to focus on the women being damaged, Tidbeck's collection is interested in the effects of their absence. Some characters never even met the person they needed. 'Arvid Pekon', for example, who spends his nights alone and



# KARIN TIDBECK

## REVIEWED AND INTERVIEWED BY STEPHEN THEAKER



works among telephone operators who frustrate the public for unknown purposes, or 'Herr Cederberg', hurt by the casual cruelty of other people – when people spoke of him, "the most common simile was pig, followed by panda, koala, and bumblebee,

in no particular order" – and tries to fly away from it all. "I might have gone mad," Pekon tells his terminal after losing control of his behaviour: that's a sentiment shared by many of Tidbeck's characters. The protagonist of 'Beatrice' seems equally sympathetic at

first, falling in love with an airship. Unfortunately she has been sold, and he settles for *Beatrice II*. By a landlord's accident they come to share a warehouse with Anna Goldberg, a printer's assistant in love with a semi-portable steam engine. This all seems cute and quirky, but an unexpected ending resets the reader's expectations for the rest of the book.

Beatrice is not the last female lost in these stories: wives, mothers, friends, and in 'Reindeer Mountain' a sister: "Cilla was twelve years old the summer Sara put on her great-grandmother's wedding dress and disappeared up the mountain." The loss, strangeness and confusion in that sentence give a good sense of the book as a whole. 'Some Letters for Ove Lindstrom' are written by a daughter after his drunken, lonely death, his life ruined by his fey wife's disappearance from the commune in which they lived. 'Rebecka' is a friend lost first to pain and then to divine judgment; it begins with her outline scorched against a wall, "arms outstretched as if to embrace someone". God exists, but let a horrific attack last three days before interceding. The 'Aunts' are three immense women fattened by Nieces until their grotesque bodies are ready to produce the next generation. As so often here, an interesting idea is pushed that little bit further, showing how the Nieces try to cope when the Aunts fail to reproduce, reflecting our own efforts to deal with tragedy and bereavement.

Like 'Aunts', many stories have the feel of dark fantasy but can be read as science fiction. One such is 'Brita's Holiday Village', where

the narrator stays in a resort unchanged since the seventies. In May, “white, plum-sized pupas hang clustered under the eaves” of the bungalows, and in June she dreams of distant relatives who stay in the cottages and hold increasingly odd summer parties. ‘Pyret’ takes the form of an academic article, presenting evidence that this mythical mimic is not “a cryptid but a real being”. After examining historical accounts of the creatures, including, most eerily, the *Sjungpastorn*, who held mass and sang a wordless song to isolated churchgoers, the writer comes to worrying conclusions. Title story ‘Jagannath’ is the last in the book, the second longest (albeit at just eleven pages), and the most straightforwardly science-fictional, in which the much-altered survivors of a great disaster live and work inside Mother – but she can’t survive forever. She’s the last and most important lost woman of the book.

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer are highly respected editors, and their first publication as proprietors of Cheeky Frawg is sure-footed, from the intriguing cover onwards. The print edition is handsome, the ebook perfectly set up (rarer than it should be, even with major publishers), the introduction ideal, the author’s afterword fascinating. The print version is perhaps slim for its price, so the cheaper ebook may prove attractive for UK readers, but the stories are so intensely emotional that you wouldn’t necessarily want it to be any longer. I spent much of my last holiday reading the much shorter books in the Penguin Mini Moderns series: Barthelme, Calvino, Petrushevs-kaya, Borges, Jackson, and so on. The remarkable stories of *Jagannath* would be perfectly at home in that company.

**The stories in *Jagannath* cover a wide range of subjects and genres. When asked what kind of writer you are, how do you answer? Do you think in terms of genre, and possible markets, when writing?**

I usually tell people I’m a writer. It annoys some people who think it’s more important what genre markers my authorship carries rather than what themes or narratives I work with. I don’t consider genre or markets, except when writing commissioned work.

**Which of the stories in the collection is closest to your heart, and why?**

‘Jagannath’, I think, because it was such an excursion into an alien mind. It really took me to a new level as a writer. I do have a soft

atmospheres. Looking at a story from the inside is different than reacting to it as a reader. ‘Aunts’ wasn’t sad or draining to write because I had the perspective of creatures with a different emotional register. Maybe it’s this contrast between the characters and the reader that creates sadness.

Returning to these stories for editing and publication is fun, especially with the older ones. It’s interesting to see what themes I’ve picked up over the years and how my technique has changed.

**Elizabeth Hand has written a lovely introduction to the book, and talks of how the book surprised her with its “strangeness”. Similarly, Ursula K. Le Guin has “never read anything like *Jagannath*”. Why do you think that is?**

**Clarion was tremendously important because it was my way into writing in English. I learned a lot about myself as a writer and made huge leaps in both storytelling and English usage. I drafted ‘Cloudberry Jam’, ‘Reindeer Mountain’ and ‘Jagannath’ at Clarion, and I consider them among my best stories to date. I also learned a ton about the industry and made friends for life**

spot for ‘Who is Arvid Pekon?’ too, because I feel sorry for all the things I made Arvid go through.

**One thing the stories share is an intense emotional quality. Even ‘Aunts’, with barely human characters doing unspeakable things to each other, is unbearably sad. Is it draining to write such emotional stories – and to then return to them again for translation, and publication? How has your relationship with these stories changed over the years?**

Readers seem to have a different emotional response to my stories than I do. They’ll tell me a story is sad or creepy, but I don’t have that kind of relationship to my stories. I write them from the inside, immersing in the personalities and

It’s of course insanely flattering to hear this from two of my heroes, and two writers who have themselves gone deep into the strange and experimental as writers. But you’d have to ask them, because I’ve no idea and I wouldn’t dare to speculate.

***Jagannath* is the first title from Jeff and Ann VanderMeer’s new imprint, Cheeky Frawg Books. How did that come about, and what was it like working with them? Have you had the opportunity to preview any of their other forthcoming books?**

Jeff and Ann knew of my Swedish story collection and asked to see some translations from it, and liked them enough to want to see the rest. We added a bunch of new



stories and that was that.

Working with the VanderMeers is a dream. They're both completely dedicated to their mission and aren't afraid of taking risks in getting new and interesting fiction out there. I don't know anyone who works as hard as they do. They're both excellent text editors – they can see exactly what you're trying to do with a text and are great at helping a story to reach its full potential. They've also been very patient with my English boo-boos, hehe. The rest of the team working on *Jagannath* have also been a blessing: Adam Mills, Teri Goulding and Jeremy Zeffoss, all working their asses off to make it happen.

I've heard about the stuff that's coming out soon, but I haven't read much of it. Very excited

function as a support network for each other. We have a lovely reverse-psychology contest going to encourage each other to submit stories: whoever racks up the most rejections of the year wins. It's been very effective – our class has been incredibly successful post-graduation.

**Philip K. Dick used to have a much larger presence in French bookshops than in English ones. Are there any fantasy and science fiction writers who do particularly – or surprisingly – well in Sweden?**

Foreign authors are huge in Sweden because our indigenous production of fantastic fiction is small. Interestingly, translations from other languages than English are on the rise. Readers have

**I did get some inspiration for environments while exploring the mountains of Gran Canaria. You think of it as this over-exploited tourist beach, but once you leave the coast and go into the mountains, it's something completely different, like being on another planet: vast mountain valleys, volcanic cliffs rising into the clouds, angry little succulents**

about the Amos Tutuola collection though, he's an old favourite.

**You attended the Clarion writers' workshop in 2010, and that appears very prominently in your bio. Why was the course so important to you, and what effect did it have upon your work?**

Clarion was tremendously important because it was my way into writing in English. I learned a lot about myself as a writer and made huge leaps in both storytelling and English usage. I drafted 'Cloud-berry Jam', 'Reindeer Mountain' and 'Jagannath' at Clarion, and I consider them among my best stories to date.

I also learned a ton about the industry and made friends for life. Our class still keep in touch and

switched into reading in English because there was such a dearth of translations before, so translating from English to Swedish is not as lucrative now. Some popular names are Dmitrij Gluchovskij and Sergei Lukyanenko (Russia), Andrzej Sapkowski (Poland), Cornelia Funke (Germany) and Maria Turtshchaninoff (Finland). Some of these are relatively unknown in English, as I understand it.

**Which writer have you read more than any other? Who is your greatest influence?**

I can't point out a single writer, but there are a bunch of authors whose work I admire and frequently read: Ursula Le Guin, Elizabeth Hand, Tove Jansson, Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore and China Miéville.

**What can you tell us about your new novel? Are there plans to make it available in English?**

*Amatka* was published in September 2012, and is a story about colonising a world where physical reality responds to language. It explores language's effect on perception and reality, and the effect of a strange and hostile environment on what starts out as a socialist utopia. It was also a prose experiment: as language is strictly controlled in the story, the prose had to mirror this. Among other things I had to cut out overt metaphors, homonyms and similes without killing the prose.

I'm working on a translation, but it'll take a while because the prose is relatively advanced compared to how I usually write in English.

**When we arranged this interview, you were on holiday in a small fishing village. Did you come away with any good ideas? Was 'Brita's Holiday Village' based on a previous vacation?**

I did get some inspiration for environments while exploring the mountains of Gran Canaria. You think of it as this over-exploited tourist beach, but once you leave the coast and go into the mountains, it's something completely different, like being on another planet: vast mountain valleys, volcanic cliffs rising into the clouds, angry little succulents.

I don't base stories on events, but I stole part of the setting for 'Brita's Holiday Village' from an old holiday village on the slopes of Åreskutan (a mountain in Sweden).

The cottages were dark, monstrous things in some sort of modernist seventies style, probably cosy in winter but completely misplaced in a summer landscape. Later on some creatures showed up in my brain and asked to live there, and kept pestering me until I let them. Some people have no manners.

# LASER FODDER TONY LEE

DEATH WATCH

THE ARRIVAL OF WANG

THE CASTLE

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

U.F.O.

CONTINUUM



Shortly after TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man* (see *Interzone* #240), Bertrand Tavernier's **DEATH WATCH** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 November) presented us with a fresh interpretation of the cybernetic eye, one with a fear of the dark that is both practical/symbolic, as low lighting damages the video camera implant, while nothing on the receiving screens means losing the audience. This is a far

bolder SF movie than that bionic action show's genre content. Based on a novel by David G. Compton, it weaves a tale of mortality and speculative media that riffs upon themes of corporate cynicism from Sidney Lumet's classic satire *Network*, although it must be said that Compton's book *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (US title: *The Unsleeping Eye*) actually predated Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay for *Network*.

Shooting in gritty modern Glasgow, director Bertrand Tavernier (recently the maker of *In the Electric Mist*) rebels against the traditions of shiny futurism so that, in its look, this is the antithesis of stereotypical SF cinema. Instead of cool hardware, it offers a subjective narrative of romantic tragedy,



It's a broad generalisation, but the differences between cinema and television are that cinema is largely concerned with spectacle of scope/scales in a format that appeals to artists and designers, while TV is usually all about the characters of a piece, presented with a cosy intimacy and tangled plotlines that provide regular work for many writers (and actors) to unravel. The current problem for genre in the media dichotomy is that while blockbuster movies can happily be one-hit wonders and, as such, get away with their limited stories, entertainment for small screens needs a formula, whether it's for a serial narrative or an anthology format. I have always

been a fan of shows like *Outer Limits* and *Twilight Zone* because they are creative outlets not unlike nursery farms. They form a welcome bridge between artistic vision that demands a high budget, and TV work that highlights prolific writing. As long as they adapt short fiction into short movies, those sci-fi programmes could continue with variable success, so it is terribly sad that recent TV schedules have lacked any such genre series. It is a situation that forces many novice filmmakers, struggling to break into even low-budget movies, to stretch basic TV resources or 40-minute plots into feature-length works, often at the expense of a taut pace and briskly convincing character arcs. In a word: padding. It is a contrivance that almost ruins **THE ARRIVAL OF WANG** (DVD, 12 November) as good 'first contact' drama, or SF satire on realpolitik themes.

What begins as a variation of *K-PAX* meets Spielberg's *E.T.* in Rome turns into near farce when the interrogation of a mysterious alien becomes a torture session –



screened through a distorting lens of reality TV. In a Britain where fatal illness is increasingly rare, an emotive storyline hinges upon cruel subterfuge that only a highly decadent society on the verge of quiet dystopia could enact. Among the film's other genre ideas: Harriet, the computer that writes novels! Katherine (played by Romy Schneider, from Orson Welles' adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*), is the 'doomed' woman, promoted as a new celebrity in a world of legalised euthanasia: "They pay you to die in public".

It's a future where privacy is diminishing alongside the targeted victim's rights, when corporate programmes and prurient interests coincide – as amoral TV producer Ferriman (Harry Dean

Stanton) notes, death is "the new pornography". Katherine, of course, is on to the company's scheming and, with "only one life to sell", she milks the contract, apparently to fund her final big adventure. Although the main plot and the backstory mirror each other, the middle-class but still a bit kitchen-sink dilemmas of broken or failing relationships manage to avoid falling into the pits of a standard telly soap opera. There is a widescreen sketch of grim poverty found on a Strathclyde dock location, from where the heroine goes on the run as if she is trying to escape from her ignominious fate. Holed up with cameraman Roddy (Harvey Keitel) at the riverside cabin in vividly green Mull of Kintyre countryside,

Katherine's reminiscences of love and life continue, further embellishing already polished character studies. The finale exposes the stunt/hoax, to challenge our perceptions of all that we have seen so far, but it's more than just a clever double-twist ending, it adds layers of poignancy when "Everything is important, but nothing matters".

The HD transfer looks superb, and disc extras include a 40-minute interview, *The Morality of Filmmaking*, with Tavernier, whose revealing comments about the differences between European/Hollywood approaches to solving technical problems (much more than just an economical inventiveness versus studio production overkill) are often wryly amusing, and occasionally hilarious.

all because paranoid local officials cannot see the difference between an ambassador for peace and a scout for invaders. As 'Mr Wang' speaks only Chinese, government agent Curti coerces civilian girl Aloisi to translate. Obviously, their conflicted characters are like odd socks in the laundromatrix of life. The octopus spy acts meekly but withholds vital details about his mission to Earth, until it's too late. The writing/directing team of brothers Antonio and Marco Manetti (the makers of *Paura 3D*) do a good Corman styled job of cranking up suspense during intro scenes, but it all drags on far too long, with repetitions and insufferable delays before each revelation about this situational/cultural time bomb.

Eventually, the doomsday clock is wound backwards to the 1950s for a WOTW ending. Perhaps it would have worked better with more of the ambiguity hinted at in those early scenes. As it is, this offbeat UFOlogy flick simply lacks the cult appeal of *Brother From Another Planet* and *X-Tro*, while

its competent deployment of a CG character for Wang strains to evoke sympathies for the captured alien's plight only to soften us up before the abrupt, and tongue-in-cheek, delivery of a closing twist in a finale that borrows its trick from Kubrick.

There is, however, something missing. Like shampoo without conditioner, a tingle without a kiss, it's all sizzle but no steak. I liked it, but was left thinking there should have been a lot more to it for a 21st century sci-fi movie. A much shorter version could have made a fine episode of *The X-Files*, and I vaguely recall an episode (*Voice of Reason?*) of the 1990s *Outer Limits* revival which had some kind of an alien interrogation story. According to the PR blurb, *Arrival of Wang* was a hit when screened at Frightfest, but I have seen reviews of such events that suggest there is a strong tendency for some overly enthusiastic genre fans to be a bit too forgiving of mediocrity, just because they are getting a sneak preview of brand new stuff.



Based on a Kafka novel, Michael Haneke's **THE CASTLE** (aka: *Das Schloss*, 1997) – out on DVD, 12 November – is a tale of alienation and a lonely stranger's struggles against mysterious officialdom.

'K' (Ulrich Mühe) is a land surveyor, called to work for a Count at a seemingly inaccessible castle. The local villagers are an unfriendly lot, refusing K lodgings at the church or inn. It is winter, and the landscape is just as inhospitable as the people. K's two new 'assistants' arrive but prove to be imbeciles, lacking the surveying equipment he expected them to bring. K lacks a permit necessary to enter the castle, and none of the peasants can, or will, help or advise him. However, neurotic barmaid Frieda (the late Susanne Lothar, Mühe's →

wife) is wholly sympathetic and provides K with shelter and sex, becoming his fiancée. K attempts to meet his employers, any representatives from the castle, or even their unreliable messenger, but his communications, like his confrontations, are blocked, so his progress is thwarted. The ordinary absurdism here is usually bleak, but occasionally farcical, and the distinctions between solemnity and satire are arbitrary.

Filed in German with English subtitles, the period setting adds even greater unfamiliarity to the impenetrable illogical moodiness of an otherworldly quality that accumulates around K, from a patina of grime to a crushing weight on his mind. The misunderstandings and doubts multiply like rabbits pulled from a magic hat, and it is hard to find anything that is kept in the dark, let alone truth. K faces an unfathomable bureaucracy sustained by idle intermediaries via the uncertainty of twilight whispers. Offended authority figures are as unforgiving as a napalm fire. A howling night wind increases outside, as if in dark symmetry with the internal confusions of K. Subjective betrayals and escalating weirdness leads to a haunted surrealism like a conjunction of Ingmar Bergman and Monty Python.

Disc extra: the biographical featurette, *24 Realities per Second* (56 minutes, in French with English subtitles), about Haneke's life/works, is illuminating but it has a studied 'informality' that's somewhat demanding and occasionally trying.

**Tony also reviews many DVDs and Blu-rays for our sister magazine *Black Static*. A convenient subscription to both magazines is highly recommended! Please visit our website ([ttapress.com](http://ttapress.com)) for all the options available.**



Previously available as a complete hi-def boxset, **THE LORD OF THE RINGS** 'extended editions' are re-released singly on Blu-ray (3 December), and these movies are, quite rightly, still acclaimed as the ultimate high fantasy trilogy. I must confess that I have not read the books but, to me, this grandiose screen version feels like a legend about disarmament, a triumph of genuine wisdom over madness, and details valiant efforts to avert the possibility of catastrophic warfare by simply getting rid of the doomsday weapon. The One Ring can only be disposed of in the fires of Mordor, and we can see the notion of meltdown destruction to put an end to evil (here, the ring is like a WMD exemplar) reflected in varied genre works: perhaps most tellingly in the annihilation of a cyborg/ultimate stealth weapon in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), thus saving the future for humanity.

Never mind the studied 'bro-mance' between Frodo and Sam, that "treacherous little toad" Smeagol/Gollum is, by implication in the prologue of *Return of the King*, very probably a gay monster. Yet he is largely consistent in his paradoxically schizoid obsession throughout this epic storyline, troubled by others suspicions, (self-) doubts, and almost as much betrayal as loyalty. It was a shame that the likeable feminist idea to update the character of Arwen into a warrior princess was abandoned in favour of remaining faithful to the source, while the trial of battling alongside the men is taken by shield-maiden Eowyn. A decade or so later, the decisions

about changes, or lack of them, to established lore may seem even more like significant weaknesses, especially when other alterations made to Tolkien's narrative (see 'purist edition' fan cuts and scholarly views on a 'travesty of adaptation') during the scripting developments and final editing now look arbitrary or inconsequential.

Despite the glorification of warfare (referencing the crusades; as 'halflings' can be read as children) where, somewhat perversely, even the long dead are called upon to fight as ghosts, these are still action movies of repeatedly astonishing spectacle as the level of threat expands from shire (village), to fortress (city), to realm (the world). There are many grotesque fantasy horrors in Middle-earth, but I still find that Shelob the giant spider is the most nightmare inducing creature of them all.

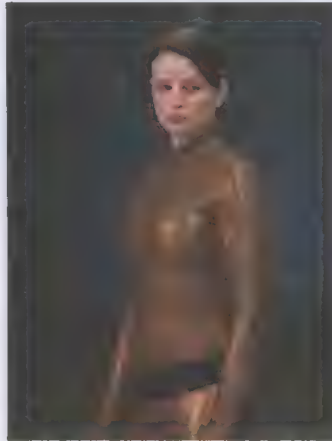
With over two hours of excellent footage added to the 558 minutes total of this trilogy's theatrical versions, the scope and the depth of this saga expands into various unexplored corners of its milieu and is all the better for its shadings/nuances of main characters, and humorous asides which thankfully included the best Tolkien joke I've heard (the punch line is "Four"). My favourite bit of newfound trivia is noticing John Noble, very good as Denethor whose suicidal despair in Gondor and trouble with two sons foreshadows-in-retrospect the actor's recent TV work playing Walter Bishop in *Fringe*. As for the protracted string of false endings, I still think Peter Jackson's opus should have shown the newly crowned king, elf royalty, and people, all bowing to the heroic hobbits, then faded to black. That would have been a saner closure. I wonder, will Peter Jackson's prequel trilogy (which I think should be titled 'Bilbo Begins' and 'The Dark Hobbit', etc) actually be any good?





Having made a disaster of his last effort, the deplorable *Airborne* (*Black Static* #29), writer-director Dominic Burns (alias Alexander Williams) turns his Tourette's brand of amateurishness to vapid sci-fi tale of alien invasion **U.F.O.** (DVD/Blu-ray, 24 December). With stars Jean-Claude Van Damme, Julian Glover and Sean Pertwee in support roles, this looks like someone watched *Skyline* and *Battle: Los Angeles* and thought they could make a trashy British version on a Derby estate with a credit card budget. Honestly, this tawdry mess makes other low-budget modestly effective flicks, such as microcosmic London comedy chillers *Attack the Block* and *Storage 24*, seem like *CE3K* scaled, grandly spectacular classics.

A showcase for boring stereotypes, *U.F.O.* sinks to levels of shameless ineptitude that are usually reserved for crap home videos. It evinces all the dramatic tension and simplified suspense of a coin toss, and it is a brow-furrowing migraine of annoyance waiting to happen. Even when trying to emulate the swears irreverence of Tarantino, Burns just proves how terribly unimaginative his uninspired approach to subgenre is, and this feeble nonsense sinks, inevitably, beneath the overwrought but vacuous self-indulgence of its unintentionally comic action scenes. If you find a copy of this DVD, I would suggest that you run away. Save yourself. Warn your friends. Like a signal from outer space that heralds a doomsday of boredom, *U.F.O.* spells out dismal prospects for any future homegrown movies of this ilk.



*Alcatraz* was set in present day San Francisco, where a lady cop was chasing baddies from the past. Simon Barry's **CONTINUUM** (Season One, DVD, 28 January) is about a female detective from the future in today's Vancouver, where she tracks down some villains from her own time. After playing a spy for TV show *Alias* and the heroine of *G.I. Joe*, Rachel Nichols must have been a casting shoo-in as Kiera Cameron for this series. Bottled-lightning set-ups of *Terminator*, *TimeCop* and *Trancers* are flipped on political/gender lines, and juggled into fairly coherent sci-fi cop drama. Frequent action scenes rattle along with plenty of energy, although *Continuum* does lapse into sentimentality – complete with melancholy song tracks – for many episodic epilogues.

Among the terrorists, Lexa Doig (*Andromeda*, *Jason X*) as Sonya Valentine is the only one of the Liber8 gang who really looks like she's from the future. Cameron's aided by young genius Alec (Erik Knudsen), an inventor/hacker who eagerly adopts his official sidekick role. Except for flashbacks to the future, SF elements are reduced when Cameron stops wearing her glitchy catsuit of invisibility. But it is amusing to see fresh visualisations of com-tech concepts, recycled from early-1970s TV movie *Probe* and its fol-

low-up series *Search*, updated with HUD for the heroine's augmented sensorial arrays that are generated by her cyber-cop implants.

The story arc veers sideways, from standard 24 antics (kidnappings, robbery, terrorism) to Occupy style protests, and routine character subplots led by an idealistic but crazy professor, involving anti-government radicals and gizmo MacGuffins. There is VR shoot-em-up game play that's dangerous to certain users, and the hostage crisis at Alec's family's farmstead brings several conspiracy elements to a violent, ultimately tragic conclusion, just as the superhero imagery is reasserted when the heroine gets her damaged biotech 'protector' suit working properly again.

"What happens in the future stays in the future." Seeing how the revolutionary movement starts – 65 years earlier – changes the heroine's views about her own time's rewritten history. But, even as one loose timeline thread is tied off, quirky references to Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* become particularly relevant to some 'dystopian destiny now' themes of economic collapse and the social upheaval in its aftermath, championed by a bitterly aged fanatic who corrupts easily confused and suicidal kids into martyrdom.

Although never as thrillingly intense as the similarly constructed *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, this is a very enjoyable sci-fi action series that deploys its nanotech in layers of sophisticated info-media that enables cyborg agent Cameron to function as an ideal super-cop model. Nichols makes the most of humorous scenes (such as having to mask her character's virtual telepathy), and is quite appealing as a quick-study detective whose futuristic investigative techniques are readily interpreted by present day police officers as uniquely advanced insight.

## MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

THE HOBBIT: AN  
UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

RISE OF THE GUARDIANS

THE TWILIGHT SAGA:  
BREAKING DAWN PART 2

**S**ylvester McCoy in a birdspatter wig on a stunt sledge drawn by rabbits: I think we can say that was pretty unexpected, and suggests that Guillermo del Toro's passing into the west from **THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY** may not have been such a disaster. At the very least, it's forced New Line to break their vow never to work with Peter Jackson again, and Jackson his own vow never to direct another bloody hobbit picture. And while this first serving of the Jackson version is still an astounding warg's breakfast, the film adaptation's epic journey from there to back again has managed to burgle some unexpected treasure from the hoard.

*The Hobbit* was a strange book to start with, and only got more so after Tolkien started fiddling with it to force it into coherence with the larger story of Sauron's quest for the Ring. But the actual 1944 rewrite of "Riddles in the Dark" (incorporated by a

happy mixup into the 1951 and subsequent editions), and the subsequent well-documented smaller changes to the text, are all but incidental to this story, which centres instead on matters that never made it into the book at all: above all, the retrospective expansion of the single sentence explaining Gandalf's detour to eject the Necromancer from Dol Guldur (which Tolkien admitted in correspondence was merely an ad hoc contrivance to take Gandalf out of the story for nine chapters) into the climax of a 2000-year prequel to the War of the Ring. The effect of this radical retroception was to turn *The Hobbit* into a Rosencrantz & Guildenstern view of the real story, which is the White Council's assault on Dol Guldur and the resultant flushing-out of Sauron from Mirkwood to Mordor. That offscreen epic, which Tolkien himself never told circumstantially in any form, makes the defeat of Smaug and the Battle of Five Armies a







### THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

footnote in a much vaster and more consequential saga, which Peter Jackson and his partners in burglary are now trying their sincerest to tell as it deserves. And while eyebrows may levitate at the late decision to expand the two films shot into three, Jackson has been here before; until Jackson blagged New Line into bankrolling a trilogy, Miramax had been trying to shrink what were then two films into one for \$75m with half the hobbits killed off. Indeed, three three-hour films is actually quite a modest frame for this very large and ambitious expanded *Hobbit*, especially if (as has been intimated) the third film will reach past the end of the novel and deep into the untold hexecontaetia beyond.

Unfortunately for Jackson, the film rights to the *Hobbit* narrative are notoriously messy – far more so than those for *LotR*, which is why Jackson had to abandon his

original 1995 plan to make *The Hobbit* first, why the 2010 MGM bankruptcy was so devastating to the production in its del Toro two-film incarnation, and why almost everyone involved – Jackson, New Line, Saul Zaentz, the Tolkien estate – has sued everyone else along the way, before a dwarvish recognition of mutual benefit from a shared quest imposed the present uneasy alliance and fellowship. Tolkien's colossal blunder in his 1969 contract with United Artists sold away the film and merchandising rights in perpetuity, thus effectively freezing his heirs out of any share in the profits. This was then compounded by the estate's own 1976 sale to Saul Zaentz, who had bought the film rights from UA, of trademarks on all the named characters, places, and objects in both works: a deal as monumentally disadvantageous to the vendor as Fox's surrender

of the *Star Wars* licensing rights to George Lucas the same year. But Zaentz unaccountably failed to pick up the distribution rights for *The Hobbit* from UA, whence they passed to MGM in the 2004 merger; and even with a defibrillated MGM aboard as co-producers, Jackson and New Line have access only to what was sold by Tolkien in his lifetime. This includes the published *Hobbit* and the text and appendices of *LotR* – but not the posthumously published material owned by Christopher Tolkien from *The Silmarillion* onwards, including anything in the 12-volume *History of Middle-Earth*, or the unpublished *Hobbit* drafts, revisions, and plot notes subsequently gathered in John Rateliff's 2007 history of the text and its 2011 addenda. Thus, for example, the film Gandalf's catalogue of the Istari includes "the two blue wizards; I forget

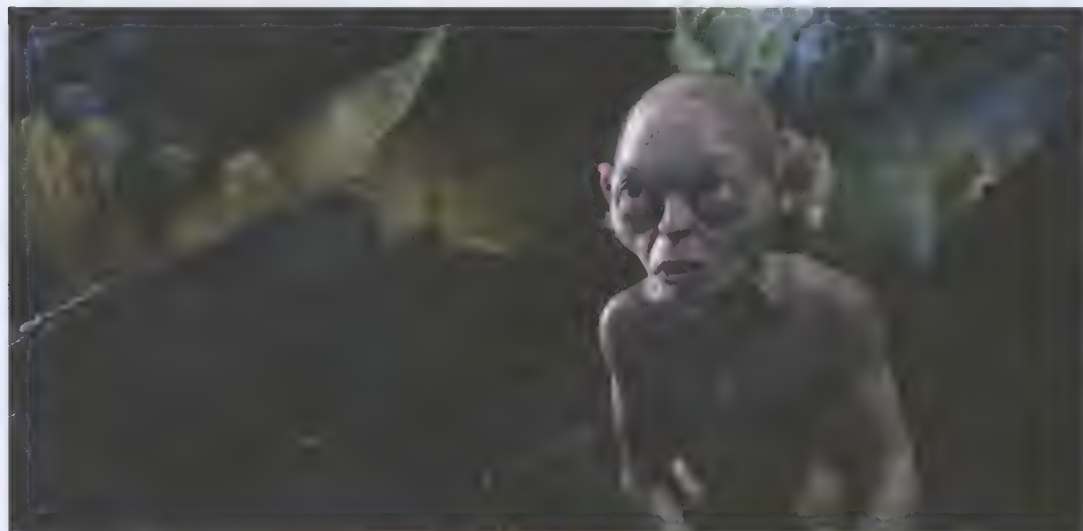
their names" (audience: "Alatar and Pallando! Keep up, Ganders"), because the names only appear in CJRT's commentary in *Unfinished Tales*. Crucially, the unowned material includes not just the abandoned 1960 rewrite, which set out to harmonise the tone with *LotR* until someone who may have been Naomi Mitchison torpedoed it after two and a bit chapters, but the 1954 retelling "The Quest of Erebor" – versions of which have been published by Tolkien *films* in *Unfinished Tales* and in Douglas Anderson's annotated edition of *The Hobbit*, and which remains the only version to attempt a causal explanation of the puzzlingly synchronous relationship between Bilbo's adventure and the White Council's campaign. Jackson may yet use this, if he can find a way to reverse-engineer it from the surviving hints and fragments in "Durin's Folk" and the Tale of Years, or simply to appropriate it without fear of a renewed legal tussle with the estate. Without it, he has a significant problem.

*An Unexpected Journey* is tentative in its address to these issues, but is at least encouragingly aware of the opportunities to resculpt the novel into something

more closely resembling JRRT's own unrealised post-*Rings* conception of its real story, no least by cashing in the new tolerance of both audiences and studios for more expansive and generous multi-part adaptations. Post-*Potter* audiences are perfectly used to long films which give space to the scenes and characters they want to see from the books, and which aren't in a rush to condense and abbreviate. And as the distended editions of the original trilogy show off very well, Jackson is perfectly able to sustain a dense, pacy narrative on a scale a third longer again than this, while his familiar weaknesses as a filmmaker – slack plotting, tin-eared dialogue, watery-eyed sentimentality, coarse melodramatisation, lazy Hollywood-formula motivation, an abhorrence of understatement, and jarringly crass injections of low-end kiwi humour – are if anything better masked by the longer running times he's continued to explore in his post-*Rings* work. It's admittedly a bold choice to devote half the first act of a gigantic 3D IMAX HFR epic to a single cramped scene of fifteen characters squeezed

into a hobbit-sized breakfast bar expounding their ample guts out; but the leisurely dwarvish comedics play well to the younger audience who need to be brought inside early if they're to put up with much of what's coming, and those who grumble about the pacing must have mercifully unremembered the interminable Cirith Ungol stretch of *Return*. Tiny throwaways inflate like airbags – the stone giants are a single sentence in the book – and time has been found not just for the pocket-handkerchief and the thrush but even for the dwarves' washing-up song and for Gollum's subterranean doggerel ditty.

If anything, Tolkien's actual story has in fact been fairly drastically condensed, pulling nine hundred years of backstory into the timeframe of the film, and eliminating Gandalf's earlier expeditions to Dol Guldur and his discovery of the Necromancer's identity almost a century before the events of *The Hobbit*. How this squares with Gandalf's acquisition of the key to Erebor from Thráin is unclear, though it will be unlike Jackson if he passes up the chance to exploit the Necromancer's involvement in the death of





Thorin's father – especially since, for more Hollywood-compliant motivation, Azog the rather ropey digital orc has here been allowed to survive his canonical slaying by Dáin after offing Thorin's granddad, and to assume the role taken in the novel by his son Bolg so that Thorin can avenge two generations of dads at once (result!). Hollywoodised in a different way is the restructured motivation of the quest to “take back Erebor”, which is here not about the treasure but the reestablishment of a homeland for the diasporised Durinfolk in “the last dwarvish kingdom in Middle-Earth” (erm, if you forget all about the Iron Hills) – and an arc for Bilbo that modulates from midlife Call to Adventure to homely hobbit's sympathy for the unhomed. (Needless to say, this being Jackson/Walsh/Boyens, Bilbo doesn't trust to show-don't-tell but spells it out for them on the big dwarvish nose.) Dol Guldur is brought into the foreground storyline by introducing an orcish pursuit by Azog on the Necromancer's business, even though this makes for a curious slippage between the scary orcs above ground and the comically inept goblins below. The White Council meet conveniently at Rivendell during Bilbo's stopover to debate northern strategy, while big backstory inserts make screentime for the arrival of Smaug, the battle of Moria, and similar nods to Tolkien's own unembarrassed fondness for analeptic flourishes. Yet mostly it's still the *Hobbit* we know with bits of the untold tipped in, and some earnest if clumsy engagement with the questions Tolkien continued to wrestle with for decades: why a hobbit? Why Bilbo? What in the name of Manwë was Gandalf thinking?

As the technical landmark it seeks to be, the film is a

fascinatingly mixed-success adventure. It's thrilling to see Jackson finally let into the 3D party, with swooping tours of Erebor in its prime and the subterranean orcpolis delivering what the famous shots of the pits of Orthanc could only foreshadow. All the same, at my screening the left visual channel dropped temporarily out when we hit Rivendell, and the audience removed their glasses to wipe lenses in bemusement, only to find themselves awakened blinking into a glowing 2D world of brilliant light and colour in which many would have been quite happy to spend the rest of the film. And while the 3D is undeniably smoother in 48fps, the unexpected cultural problem with the crispness and clarity of HFR is that it looks to most eyes like television, an impression hardly helped by the engagement of so many small-screen faces. The dwarves do what they can, the broader performances nicely darkened by knowledge of Thorin's arc, the fates of his nephews, and what will happen to the amiable Balin when he tries to replicate the Erebor triumph in Moria. But the cut from Ian Holm to Martin Freeman in the role of Bilbo only underlines the difference in register from the earlier trilogy, as a comic actor of great deftness and timing but more limited dramatic range takes over, still in his Arthur Dent dressing gown, from a stunning classical master of sixpence tonal turns. Freeman is good at pity staying his hand, but you still can't quite imagine him doing Bilbo's scene with the Ring in Rivendell in *Fellowship*.

While the action sequences and the landscapes all look lovely, the art of makeup has yet to catch up with the more ruthless scrutiny afforded. If you were going to choose a film to showcase the attractions of 48fps IMAX, you

probably wouldn't opt for one in which thirteen of your most closeupped characters perform in fake foreheads and latex honkers, and your returning stars are ten-years-older actors attempting to play versions of their characters sixty years younger. Gandalf is disconcertingly ravaged; you can see every one of Galadriel's new elven wrinkles; and a painfully frail Saruman has had his sit-down role pasted digitally in from Pinewood and then telepathically talked over anyway (probably a mercy, as the audible part of his speech is frankly beneath his dignity, with some quite dreadful stuff about Radagast's excessive consumption of mushrooms and a nonsense line about “calling himself the Necromancer” when they've just made that title up themselves). The overwhelming effect is to make the insanely expensive look cheap, and while one does attune to the look, it's not in the immersive way its makers hope but rather in a heightened tolerance of artificiality and semiosis, with the long, actorly dialogue scenes and sub-illusory makeup repeatedly invoking the feel not of film but of theatre, quite often to the film's advantage. The riddles in the dark, in particular, play beautifully as a nine-minute two-hander (only one pair of riddles is cut) between two scenery-eating performers at the very top of their game, and it seems almost incidental that one of them happens to be mocapped. Perhaps this is indeed the next revolution in cinema, but you can bet Jim Cameron is nervous.

From time to time in the writing of both *Hobbit* and *LotR* Tolkien would stop in his tracks and review the road ahead, and his *Hobbit* notes especially show the story being improvised as it went – which is why Thorin's arc in the book takes such an unanticipated turn, and Bard is so



### WISDOM OF THE HOBBIT

belatedly promoted and named as a pivotal figure. *Journey's* horripilant climactic shot of Erebor seen from the Eyrie invites a similar mapping of the way that will lie before them when Bilbo awakes in *The Desolation of Smaug* with the early sun in his eyes. That Jackson is playing a thoughtful long game is suggested by the almost impossibly dense allusions to *Fellowship* in particular, from the initial undeleted scenes from the day of Bilbo's eleventy-first, via the myriad Bag End details reactivated for new meaning and resonance, to the visual quotation of Frodo's moment in the Prancing Pony when the ring first falls on to Bilbo's finger. Thranduil pops his head around the door as a teaser for his role in film 2, but nothing is yet seen of his famous son – nor of Glóin's, at this time a youngster of 62, nor of any ten-year-old human ward wandering round Rivendell in the background,

though it seems inconceivable that something will not occur on the back-again; and while it would be pleasant not to see any more of Liv Tyler, the smart money must be on some involvement of Lorien in the Dol Guldur campaign which would open a window of opportunism that Jackson might find hard to resist. Given that we open on an owl eye and end on Smaug's, it's a safe bet what the final shot of *There and Back Again* will be. Of course we can safely expect disappointments, even desolation – but perhaps at least a fourteenth share of gold.

After del Toro parted ways with *The Hobbit* he took a consultant gig at DreamWorks, where he's been particularly closely involved with **RISE OF THE GUARDIANS**: an animated project originated by the great illustrator William Joyce, who has since produced his own

*Hobbitesque* multi-part prequel epic in a rapidly-unfolding series of novels and picture books (five in the space of a year, with further volumes to come). The books are far stranger, wilder, and more deeply felt than the distinctly tame and formulaic film, if at the same time much less certain of their narrative and audience – threading a serial storyline that might kindly be called dreamlike around a fantastic interplanetary steampunk mythology about the war between bogeyman Pitch the Nightmare King and an alliance of heroic children with origin-story versions of Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and the Sandman. (*Rise's* lead Jack Frost is scheduled for a future volume, but hasn't yet made his print debut at all.) The film version, set centuries later in the present day, retains only the superhuman leads and versions of some of Joyce's character designs – though





### THE TWILIGHT SAGA: BREAKING DAWN PART 2

the books' Lyraesque human heroine Katherine, a warmly imagined version of the author's late daughter, has been curiously parachuted instead into Blue Sky's rival Joycean animation *Epic*. Instead, the film presents us with a high-concept superhero team of public-domain fantasy figures in what one gradually realises is essentially an unsettling family reimaging of *American Gods*.

Screenwriter David Lindsey-Abaire has done this public-domain metamashup before on the film version of *Inkheart*, and has another in the oven with *Oz the Great and Powerful*. But *Guardians* is the most interestingly confused mythology, based as it is on a cast of invested lies: the fabrications that adults knowingly inflict on children, and the awakening from which constitutes an irreparable loss of innocence and abandonment of faith in adult authority. Pitch's

plan is to undo the visitations of Toothiana and Bunny so that children worldwide will no more believe in the Tooth Fairy and Easter Bunny than they currently believe in Jack Frost, leaving only the boogeyman as childhood's true object of living belief: "No Christmas or Easter or little fairies that come in the night; there will be nothing but fear and darkness and me" – or, as we know it in this life, adulthood. Fortunately Jack, who has never been an object of active faith, is insulated against not being believed in, and can hold it together where the rest of them fail, sprinkle fun ("That's it! That's my centre!") around kids so their eyes light druggily up and they attempt high-risk winter stunts you should absolutely not try at home unless there's an invisible folk superhero looking out for you. It's certainly the prettiest DreamWorks animation to date, its very strong visual

design shot in warm illustratorly colours with Roger Deakins advising on the cinematography. But the film has underperformed domestically – perhaps because it's a Christmas film set at Easter, which is, well, unexpected, but perhaps because it's fairly nakedly about the survival of religion in a secularising world as essentially an infantile nostalgia for falsehood, a message further complicated by the tactical unbranding of Christmas and Easter as spiritual festivals for all faiths and none. "Easter is new beginnings, new life; Easter is about hope" – dispersing any illusion that it might be about the resurrection of a Judean cult leader and agitator, or failing that about chocolate. Hope again, boys and girls.

As one literary franchise rises afresh and another stumbles to likely oblivion, *The Twilight Saga* pulls its covers around it and



kisses goodnight in **BREAKING DAWN PART 2**. Spinning 169 minutes from six chapters of *The Hobbit* is nothing to the challenge facing Bella's happy-forever-after finale, which has had to come up with an exciting way to cinematicise a story whose defining, indeed climactic, feature is that nothing whatever happens. Stephenie Meyer's disarmingly fannish relationship with her own creation largely forbids that characters cared about should come to harm, extending the grace of invulnerability and reluctant forgiveness even to series villains; and the second half of *Breaking Dawn* is essentially the final season of *Buffy* without the last episode, as the Cullens old and new assemble an army of sympathisers to square up against the Volturi legions for a huge, promiscuously cinematic battle-of-Hogwarts finale, only for a truce to be talkily negotiated that allows everyone to go home without a blow struck. Whatever

one's feelings about the book quartet – and no account can satisfy that doesn't give due weight to their deep emotional empathy for their readership's anxieties and dreams – it's difficult not to admire the sheer perversity and refusal of infantile Hollywood comforts in this radical anticlimax, and more difficult still to see how it could ever translate to film. But the solution found, through some light replotting using established powers and characters in a slightly redirected way, is so elegant, ingenious, and effective at making the same point about the same outcome while giving the film the big *X-Men 3* ending it craves, that one can't but admire its craft. The preceding hour and a half are taken up with yeastless pre-plotting, an increasingly outré series of guest appearances as the Cullens host a protracted houseparty for silly vampires including ginger Irish ones (Thranduil pops up in this one too), and some extremely

unsettling acceleration of Bella's transition through the adult lifecycle as her progress from bride to mom is further speeded up by little Renesmee's digital transition through a series of fantastically creepy vales of the uncanny from infancy to premature betrothal. But at the end everyone kisses and Bella lets Edward, who's been surprisingly fun in this episode, into her head at last and flashbacks the whole trilogy for his benefit; and the last shot lingers on the book's last word "forever", before the aptly neverending credits wind back through the many versions of Sir and Lady Not Appearing in This Film. It's been a bloody long journey there and back again with Bella and Edward, but like the cliff-dangling scenes in *The Hobbit* it only feels like we've been watching them forever. As the ring-bearing Bella now passes over sea to her *Huntsman* sequel in a future filled with dwarves, we shall unexpectedly miss them.





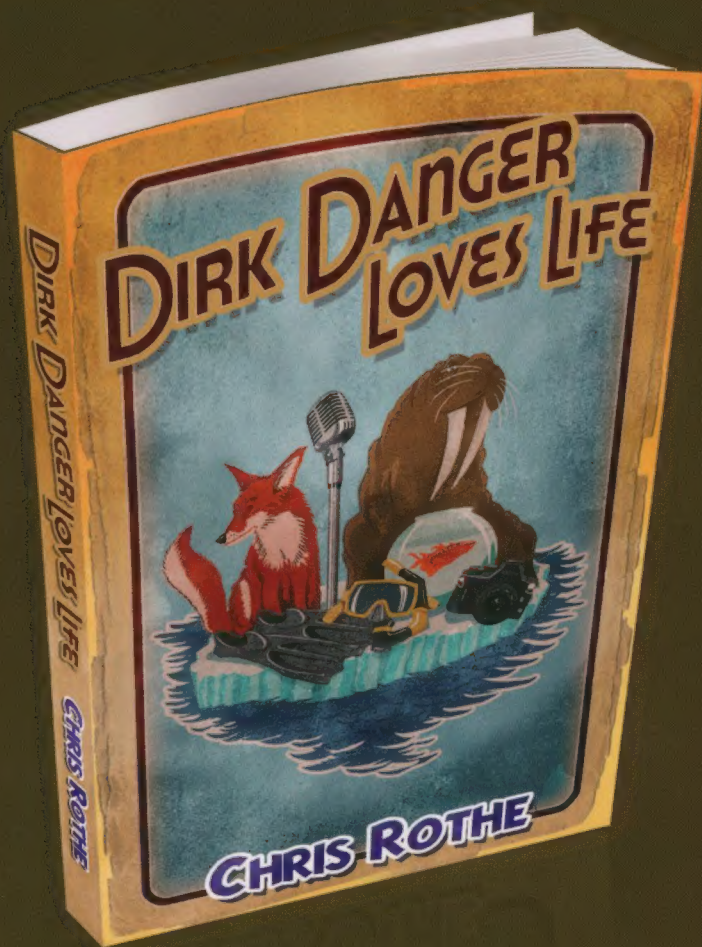


I had walked through the door feeling like a little shit when Dirk had asked me from the kitchen how things had gone. It was getting late and he had started on dinner.

"I vandalized public property and yelled at a bum," I said.

Dirk stopped stirring some pasta and looked at me blankly.

"I see..." he said. "So it went well then?"



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